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Extreme Love - 1
Matthew 5:38-42
March 30th, 2014, Jeff Germs

We are continuing our study on The Sermon on the Mount. It is, without a doubt, the most revolutionary teaching ever given to humankind by anyone in history. And it is also, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood teachings in the Bible. Those who are legalistically inclined will have a particularly hard time getting to the heart of Jesus' intentions in this teaching. They will take a look at all of the things he says in Matthew 5 through 7 and conclude that Jesus is giving some new laws or commands to replace the Old Testament law.

This is especially the case with 5:17-48 where Jesus says several times, "You have heard it said...but I say..." It sounds like he is giving new laws, but that misses the heart of the matter. He very clearly said in verse 17 that he came to accomplish or satisfy the law. He didn't come to add more. He said in Matthew 22 that the two most important commands that summed up every other command in entire Bible is to love God and love others.

Jesus said in John 13,

John 13:34-35 (NLT)

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³⁴ So now I am giving you a new commandment: [so, here is his new command] Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. ³⁵ Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.

Since Jesus came and satisfied the law by his sacrifice on the cross two thousand years ago we, as his followers, are to live by the law of love.

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If we always ask in every situation, "What does love look like?", and then depend on the Spirit of Jesus to help us do the impossible we will live according to the commands of Jesus. He calls us to do the impossible so that we need him.

One of the problems with seeing all of the teachings of Jesus as simply more commands that we need to satisfy, as I have already said in previous sermons, is that we tend reduce his teaching to legalistic requirements. And when we do that we automatically look for loopholes. We look for the minimum and do that and then feel good about ourselves because we have given or performed what we feel is the prescribed commands. So, let's take a look at our text for today and apply it to our situation today.

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Matthew 5:38-42 (NLT)

³⁸ "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. ⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. ⁴² Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

"**You have heard it said...**" Again, Jesus is referring to Old Testament law here. A law that became known as *lex talionis*, or, the law of retaliation. It's so important to understand the culture into which this was written over 3500 years ago. Revenge to satisfy honour was the norm. So, if you were hurt by someone, or if your family was hurt by someone, in order to satisfy your honour it was incumbent upon you to get revenge. This was not a culture that honoured God in any way. It was the result of a society of people going their own way and doing what comes naturally, because whenever we do what comes naturally we hurt others. And the culture, in that era, and that place, was that revenge is honourable. So much so that it got out of hand.

Here is the Old Testament quote that Jesus refers to.

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Exodus 21:23-25 (NLT)

²³ But if there is further injury, the punishment must match the injury: a life for a life, ²⁴ an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, ²⁵ a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise.

If you read this legalistically, out of context, you would think that this is what the Bible prescribes. But that is totally missing the point.

The whole point of this Old Testament law was to ensure that those who had an injustice done to them didn't retaliate with something greater. "You said something nasty to me. I am going to spread a vicious rumour about you for the purpose of destroying your character." And then of course, the other person, if they are living by the same values of retaliation ups the ante even further and on and on it goes until WW III breaks out.

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This law wasn't given as a prescription for what to do if someone hurts you. It was given to regulate justice in a culture where revenge was out of control. And it was also not meant for personal vendettas. They were to be dealt out within the legal judicial system. So, the intent of the Old Testament law was, if someone breaks your arm, you don't break their arm and then for good measure, break a leg. The point was that there was to be equalization of injury within the judicial system, not two legs for one leg. By the time of Jesus this *lex talionis* became so twisted that the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived saw the law as something that was prescribed by God.

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And once more, **Jesus is not giving new laws for us to satisfy. He satisfied the law by his death on the cross.** It would be easy for those who are legalistically inclined to take these four statements that sound like imperatives from verses 38 to 42 and add them to their growing list of rules or principles that they blindly have to live by. There are many problems with this interpretation. The most obvious one is that you can do all of these things with a heart that is cold and hard.

Many of you have probably heard the joke about the little boy who is standing up on the pew in church and his mother tells him to sit down. I think I've heard pastors tell this joke about a hundred times. I swore I would never tell it, but the situation demands that I do. The boy wants to stand up and so he argues back and forth with his mother until there is an ultimatum given. "If you don't sit down you will have to deal with your father when we get home." So he sits down and says, "Ok, but I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside."

That's exactly what we do when we deal with the Sermon on the Mount as if Jesus is giving us some more laws to live by. We totally miss the point. Jesus is not giving more laws. He is saying, "Check your heart. These are the kinds of ways that people will respond if they are living the kingdom kind of life now."

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What he is saying is that **if the seed of the Gospel, that is the good news of Jesus' resurrection life, lives in us we will not retaliate. We will want what is best for the other person even if they have hurt us.** That was revolutionary 3500 years ago when the law of Moses was given. It was revolutionary 2000 years ago, in the time of Jesus. And it is revolutionary now in 2014.

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There is no way that we can live that kind of life on our own initiative. That is exactly why we need Jesus.

Let's look again at our text.

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Matthew 5:38–42 (NLT)

38 "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. 40 If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. 41 If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. 42 Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

Now, imagine how this must have been received by those listening. The religious people had previously felt justified getting even and hating those who had hurt them. Jesus says something that went totally against the stream of religious thought. It is not ok to get revenge. And as a matter of fact if someone slaps you on the right cheek offer them the other one as well. If someone sues you for your shirt give them your coat too. If a soldier asks you to carry his stuff for a mile, don't argue. Go the extra mile. And never turn anyone away who wants to borrow from you. This would not have sat well with them. It would have been a very hard pill to swallow, indeed.

This all would have sounded crazy to them? But, we have to remember again that Jesus is not giving new laws. We also have to remember that, like in the topic of anger, lust, and adultery is speaking in hyperbole, or exaggeration in order to make a point.

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And his point is that, **as Christ-followers, we need to do what does not come naturally to us at all and that is to think more about others than ourselves.**

In our culture, we are all about OUR rights. We know our rights and we don't want anyone infringing on them. I hope I don't shock anyone here this morning, but what Jesus is saying is that, **as Christ-followers we don't have rights.**

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At least, we are not to be living in such a way that we are constantly thinking about who is or isn't stepping on our toes. We need to become unoffendable. Our constant mindset, instead of "Who's stepping on my toes?", should be, "How can I bless those around me. Even those who are not easy to love." Ruth has a habit of every day asking God to open her eyes to who he wants her to love today. And sometimes it is, surprisingly, someone that is hard to love. That is Jesus' main point here. It is extreme love and servanthood even to those who you believe are actively working against you.

Now, this is hard for us to hear because when we are hurt we feel justified in our anger. "So and so hurt me. I have a right to get even. I have a right to fight back." Sorry, not according to Jesus. You only have a right to love.

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If you feel somehow justified in your anger or your desire to get even you have not yet experienced the grace of God in your life in any real way.

Jesus is not asking us to do something that he was not willing to do. Remember, he was arrested, beaten, tried, and crucified on the cross and did not retaliate. He actually asked God, the Father to forgive those who hurt him.

In Romans 5:8 Paul says,

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Romans 5:8 (NLT)

8 But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

And in verse 10 of Romans 5 Paul says that God became our friend while we were his enemies.

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He does not wait until we deserve his love before he loves us. Why do we think that we can't love others until they prove themselves to us?

Now, lest you get totally demoralized and think that Jesus is saying we always need to be doormats and let people walk all over us I need to add that Jesus is not referring to total pacifism here. There are times when we need to fight. There are times when we need to argue. There are times when we need to say "no" to people who think that its ok to take advantage of us over and over again with no consequences. There are times when we need to fight against injustices in the world around us.

Ruth was in a car accident quite a few years ago when we were still in Alberta. She was rear ended and got whiplash. The insurance company made an initial offer to her which we didn't think would be sufficient to pay of all the physiotherapy that she needed so we negotiated for more. It turns out that it was a good thing we did because she is still bothered by the injury over fifteen years later.

Someone who takes a legalistic view of Jesus' teaching here would say that we should have just taken what they offered and not argued our point. That is missing the heart of the matter. We pay insurance premiums so that we are taken care of in situations like this and it's ok to negotiate for what we know we will need.

The issue at hand is, as always, the condition of our hearts. We must not give into a toxic mindset that is always looking to get even, and to get more than our share, and to be continually looking out for ourselves at the expense of others. We need to become very aware of our inner voice. We have an inner voice and an outer voice. And it's not just the outer voice that we need to be mindful of. It's also our inner voice because it reflects the condition of our hearts towards others.

So, whether someone has hurt us, or is trying to sue us, or you feel like someone in authority over you (a soldier in Jesus' example) takes advantage of you, or someone asks to borrow from you, don't give into toxic heart attitudes. They hurt your relationships, and they hurt you. That kind of toxicity physically, emotionally, and spiritually destroys you. It is not worth it.

What was Jesus' attitude?

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1 Peter 2:21–23 (NLT)

21 For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. 22 He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. 23 He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly.

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Romans 12:17–21 (NLT)

17 Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. 18 Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. 19 Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord. 20 Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads." 21 Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

Here is the key. Both Peter and Paul are reiterating what God said in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 32:35. It is not our job to take vengeance. That is God's job.

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When we try to get even we are attempting to do God's job. That is idolatry. When we want to get even with someone we are essentially saying that we want to be god of our own lives. We are saying that we don't believe God. We are saying that we don't trust him to do his job.

And we all, at times, think we are justified in our toxic attitudes. We think that we deserve to feel the way we do, that it's ok to, for example, slander someone, because after all they hurt me first, so it's ok that we gossip about them with impunity. But, that is never ok.

The antidote is to, instead, serve them. Ask God how you can practically love them. Pray for their blessing.

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I know this goes totally against how we naturally feel, but it is the way of Jesus. And, contrary what we would think, it is the way that will bring us peace.

We hear things like "Revenge is sweet." Movies about revenge are extremely popular because it makes us feel good that justice is being met. There is some resolution that we long for. The problem with that kind of thinking is that it shows a complete lack of trust in God's ability to make things right.

Some very good friends of ours had their young adult son murdered just over a year ago. It was a needless tragedy. I was in Israel when it happened. Taylor was just twenty one years old. He was house sitting for someone who happened to be of questionable character when somebody came to rob the house of drugs, thinking that there was no one home. Taylor was accidentally killed by the perpetrator.

Our friends are still struggling very much with this in a lot of ways. I cannot imagine going through what they have had to endure. They will never see Taylor alive on this earth again. All the plans they had together for the future will never be because a careless young man who had lost his way took Taylor's life. What would it be like to try to forgive someone who just killed your child?

Well, Paul and Wendy, and their kids chose, in spite of their feelings, to forgive someone who didn't deserve to be forgiven. Taylor's sister said, "There's no point in destroying the lives of two young men." Paul actually sat in the same room with his son's murderer and expressed very clearly and firmly that he was angry, but that because of how much he, himself had been forgiven by God, he chooses to forgive Jesse - the killer.

That is quite amazing isn't it. It puts some of us to shame doesn't it? What kinds of petty things do we choose to harbour in our hearts instead of granting someone the freedom of forgiveness? We destroy ourselves when we choose not to forgive. The way of Jesus is to forgive even when everything in you wants to get revenge.

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The best revenge is to take the high road and invite others to join you there. Contrary to popular belief, there is no peace in getting even. There is only peace in forgiveness.



Extreme Love 1
Matthew 5:38-452
Week of March 30th, 2014

Object of this study: To understand the high call of Jesus to love those, by his grace, who we naturally do not want to love.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 37 meditatively to the group. (after each phrase pause and let the Lord speak to you before reading the next)
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

1. What movies have you seen that give the message "Revenge is sweet"?

Word (20 – 30 minutes)

1. What stood out for you from the sermon?
2. Read Matthew 5:38-42 and Exodus 21:23-25.
What is the background to Jesus' words: What was the culture of the day when Moses gave the Israelites God's law in Exodus? How was this law protecting life? What was the culture of Jesus' day, including the attitude of the teachers of the law and the religious leaders? What is our culture's attitude towards revenge and protecting our rights?
3. Read Romans 5:7-8 and 1 Peter 2:21-23.
How did Jesus live out his words of Matthew 5:38-42? How could he be at peace about it?

Sermon quote: ***"The issue is the condition of our hearts. We must not give in to a toxic mindset that is always looking to get even, and to get more than our share, or to be continually looking out for ourselves at the expense of others. We need to become very aware of our inner voice. We have an inner voice and an outer voice, and it's not just the outer voice that we need to be mindful of, but also our inner voice because it reflects the condition of our hearts towards others."***

Work (20 – 30 minutes)

1. How do you feel when you get revenge, or want to?...or if you forgive? ...or if you bless the other person and your words and actions lead to reconciliation? Think of someone close to you. How does life go when you: get revenge? forgive? actively work for good for them and for your relationship?
2. What sort of toxic attitudes do you see in your own heart sometimes?
3. Jesus is talking about righteousness reaching our heart, changing us, as we experience the grace of God in our lives. He is saying that if the seed of the gospel has been planted in our heart, this is the fruit it will bear. Read John 13:34-35 and Romans 12:17-21. Consider this quote: "The best revenge is to take the high road and invite the other person to join you there." What do you think this means? How can we overcome evil with good? Think of a situation that really bugs you and ask God for ideas on how to overcome evil with good in that situation.
4. ***"Our constant mindset should become, 'How can I bless those around me, even those who are not easy to love.' If we ask in every situation 'What does love look like?' and then depend on Jesus to help us, we will live according to the commands of Jesus."*** How would your life, your day, change if you asked yourself these questions?
5. How does taking revenge, or letting thoughts of revenge fill our minds, show a lack of trust in God? And conversely, how does blessing show, and also build, our trust in God?
6. Pick one of the scripture passages from today's study. Spend time this week thinking about it, maybe memorizing it, somehow working it into your life, especially into your heart.

Optional/for further study: The doormat question

The passage of today's study can lead to the question "Does God want me to be a doormat?"

To address this, read Matthew 18:15-35. Consider what Jesus says about forgiving from the heart (verses 21-35), and also his teaching in verses 15-20 about "If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." See also Ephesians 4, especially verses 15 & 16. Note the importance of both speaking the truth and love, with the goal of growing to maturity. Also Leviticus 19:17. In all of these passages, truth is mixed with love rather than hatred, delivered with the goal of growth and healthy relationships.