

## **Matthew 5:38-48 St Marc Grenoble 21.4.24**

I like to start my sermons with some humour, but realised that most of my jokes use language and cultural references that may pass many of you by. So I'll give them a try, but don't worry if you don't understand them, but I'll give it a go. I heard a discussion recently about how much better the French health service is than the British. Even so, it is still much better than it used to be - When my great Uncle Bert was poorly – all they could do was cover his back with lard .....after that he went downhill very quickly

I want to try and introduce you to what was a light bulb moment for me (Explain light bulb moment) Try and imagine the scene I am driving on a motorway in England (Left hand side of the road) Up ahead the road starts to go uphill and a lorry is slowly passing an even slower one. The outer lane becomes a long queue of cars overtaking the lorries. The other thing you need to know is that tend to leave a larger braking distance than many others (Explain the 2 second rule) I look in my wing mirror and way back in the queue an Audi pulls out of the queue and starts to come up on the inside. AS I get closer to the lorries, I realise that the gap I have left as a braking distance is his target. Like many British people I have a strong sense the priority of queues and dislike of queue jumpers and I was angry that he didn't wait his turn. Almost having a mind of its own, my right foot pushed down very slightly on the accelerator and I closed the gap between me and the car in front, trapping the offender behind the slow lorry. It was at this moment that the realisation of what had just happened hit me. My normal choice is to leave a gap and drive safely – I had responded to this other drivers behaviour by dropping my standards. At this point WHO WAS IN CONTROL?

In a real way I had given control of my life and decisions to someone else.

Hold that thought in your mind as we turn to our Gospel passage

This passage is taken from a great sermon Jesus preached known as the Sermon on the Mount. It covers 2 of the 6 sections which Jesus introduces with "You have heard that is was said....but I tell you...." In both of these Jesus moves his hearers from reacting according to what others have done to interacting on the basis of who they are.

Let me give you a simple example to explain what I mean. When we moved into our street about 3 years ago, most of the people were incredibly friendly, except for one family who at their best were indifferent but could be rude and angry. I was advised to avoid them but it is my nature to smile and greet my neighbours. I could have responded according to how they behaved and ignored them, but I decided to be guided by who I am and decided I would always greet them in the same way I would greet everyone else – and a couple of times I actually got a grudging response which was almost a smile. So this passage could be subtitled "behave as you are as children of God, not according to how you have been treated".

As we will see this is quite revolutionary, but also very hard to put into practice. How can Jesus ask us to do this? I think there are 3 reasons Jesus was able to introduce this new way of living:

1. The example of Jesus: Jesus, in his life, set a new standard for love. His love for us is not determined by what we have done - our behaviour cannot change his love for us – Nothing we do can make him love us more and nothing we can do can make him love us less. Sometimes we struggle to believe he can forgive us because we haven't yet grasped that none of us have the strength to change his love. Every response of Jesus towards us is motivated by his love – last week we reminded ourselves that he will allow us to turn our backs on him, but the moment we turn back to him – he embraces us in his love again.
2. The power of the Spirit: The second reason that Jesus can set new standards for his followers is that following the resurrection, we have a new resource – the Holy Spirit of Jesus himself – who gives us

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the strength to become more like him. In 2Corinthians 3:18 Paul wrote: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being [transformed](#) into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” And in Colossians 1:27: “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”<sup>1</sup>Where Glory is the character and nature of God – so that leads on to the third reason

3. The purpose of the Church – to reveal the character and nature of God to the world. The central theme to the Bible is God revealing himself: It starts in the Garden with Adam and Eve made in his image, called to reflect the character and nature of God. Then God’s people, the Israelites are given a set of rules which are what God would do if he were in their situation: Abraham was told they would be blessed, not to make them special, but so that through them the rest of the world would be blessed. When they observed the laws other nations would see what God is like and that he is greater than their gods’. Jesus, the Word of God was God revealing himself at every moment. In the power of the Spirit we are called to imitate Jesus and show the world what he is like. Whether we like it or not, whether we live it out or not – the world looks at us and says “That’s what their God is like!”

So let’s see how this works out in our passage:

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’<sup>g</sup> <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, Do not respond to evil with evil<sup>2</sup>

The “Eye for an eye and tooth is taken from the Old Testament:

Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy all have discussions of justice when attacked or wronged, which include take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. An instruction that is often misunderstood – even by Mahatma Ghandi who is usually credited with saying: “An eye for an eye would make the whole world blind”

What he had failed to understand is that the instruction, an eye for an eye is not a command for revenge – but a limit to it. When you read the Old Testament the violent nature of the times stands out – communities are fighting communities; tribes are fighting tribes and nations are fighting nations. One attack, so often led to a bigger attack back and rapidly escalated into a major conflict. I checked the news this morning to see if the attacks between Israel and Iran had escalated further. So, the Old Testament rule was not about God telling them to take revenge – it was a way of preventing that revenge escalating by limiting revenge to same severity. But, Jesus sets a new standard which goes well beyond the old rule – a new standard which takes control in the name of love. Rather than just reacting because of what someone else has done – we take control and choose to love, because that is how Jesus loves us

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Col 1:27.

<sup>g</sup> Exodus 21:24; Lev. 24:20 and Deut. 19:21

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Mt 5:38–39.

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The examples of working this out are difficult to interpret in our culture, so let's just take one: The Romans were an occupying force in Palestine. A Roman soldier was able to command a Jew to carry his pack for him for a mile. He could grumble and mutter, but he had no choice in that. AT the end of the mile – the usual thing would be to drop the pack, but if you chose to carry it for a further mile, that would be choice – bringing love into the situation. For the first mile you have no choice – but after that you can act according to love or anger – the choice of who controls your behaviour is yours.

Jesus then said: <sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour<sup>h</sup> and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies<sup>i</sup> and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven<sup>3</sup> Here really is a tough one. Just for a moment try and think of a time recently when someone has made you angry.....I am guessing that at that point your behaviour and your speech were partly shaped by your anger, rather than taking control of the situation in love, you have allowed their behaviour to control you. (I am not saying that bad behaviour shouldn't be punished – love which wants the best for someone wants their bad behaviour changed) but our goal is to imitate Christ whose love for us is unconditional and is born out of who he is, not whether we deserve it. The heart of forgiveness is choosing to love and pray for those who deserve our anger or hatred.

Choosing to be faithful to the people Jesus calls us to be in the face of bad behaviour of others is a discipline that requires 2 actions

- a. Focus on the way Jesus loves and forgives us – we are far more forgiven than offended against
- b. Make a conscious choice – I still find when I am driving that I want to close the gap when someone has overtaken on the inside – and I have to remind myself that I choose to be in control of my safety – even if that means letting someone else get away with stupid, selfish behaviour. It is a choice (albeit a difficult one) to take back control when someone has hurt, embarrassed or offended us. A choice to not respond according to the way their behaviour makes us feel – but by seeing them through Jesus' eyes of love.

In this love that knows no boundaries, we choose to take control by reflecting the generosity of God, who sends blessing upon both the righteous and the unrighteous and who has brought the kingdom to the unworthy

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<sup>h</sup> Lev. 19:18

<sup>i</sup> Some late manuscripts *enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you*

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Mt 5:43–45.