

## Matthew 5: 31-48 sermon 21.3.2021 – Loving as God loves

Some of you will remember back to the 1976 Olympic Games and the gymnastics. There was a 14 year old Romanian gymnast called Nadia Comaneci. In one of her routines she did so well, in fact, perfectly, that she became the first person to receive a perfect 10 score in gymnastics. Perfect 10. That means she couldn't do any better. Absolutely no mistakes, or wobbles, or imperfections. Perfect!

Did you see the last sentence of our reading today? "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." No mistakes, no wobbles, no imperfections!! Impossible! Two weeks ago we had the sermon title, "8 impossible things to do ...before breakfast." This week – One impossible thing to do. Not TRY and be perfect. But BE perfect, just like God the Father. No one can be perfect. So what is going on here.

Recap of last week. We're thinking of what it means to be a person who is a kingdom person, a person who follows Jesus as king of their life. And in chapters 5-7 Jesus is describing for us what it is like to live in his kingdom. The standards are way up here. Remember that Jesus said that he had not come to get rid of the old Testament. He knew that the Pharisees followed the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law; they had relaxed the demands of the law. And we looked at two of those last week dealing with murder and adultery. So this week we continue on to look at 4 more examples of how the laws had been relaxed by the Pharisees. The 4 examples are to do with divorce, making oaths, retribution and loving. And let's see how Jesus finishes up with that extraordinary sentence Be perfect like God.

**Divorce** – Straight away as we read v.31 we see the way the bar has been lowered for this law. **Read v.31** Yes, it is true that this law is there in Deuteronomy 24:1. But this was given at this particular time really as a concession. But if you read further in

Deuteronomy 24 the divorced couple are not to remarry, if the woman is divorced a second time. The whole intent of Deuteronomy was to rein in or to regulate what was going on in Moses' time. Men were divorcing their wives willy nilly, as they felt like it. But God's intention all along was for a life-long union between a man and a woman. But the Pharisees are saying Ah, it's there in the commandments in Deuteronomy so you can do it, just include a certificate of divorce." It had become a light thing to divorce and remarry. And very difficult for women. Because of their position in society at that time they had no choice but to remarry if they were going to survive.

There is a more detailed discussion of divorce by Jesus in Matthew 19, so we won't say too much here. One thing is clear, though, God's intention with marriage from creation was for a permanent relationship given by God where a man and a woman leave their parents in order to form a new unit in society and then become "one flesh". The Pharisees clearly regarded divorce lightly, Jesus took it seriously. It's important to read this section on divorce in its context. Jesus is talking about the lives of people in the kingdom and how they respond to the law. Our lives are to reflect the very highest standards of righteousness. The Pharisees focus was on what grounds can we legitimately get divorced – what's the lowest standard by which we'll be ok. But Jesus calls us to bear in mind that these are two people who are yoked together, joined together and they must do everything they can to preserve this union – so we will love and forgive each other, we will strive to be peacemakers in every situation of strife in our marriage. And if you look at the two examples on either side of divorce, we will be brutally cutting off any lustful temptation in order to maintain a love for my wife or husband and we'll be speaking truthful, honest words in order to maintain trust in our relationship.

**Oaths** - Again, in v.33-37 Jesus is going behind the Old Testament regulations concerning oaths. Oaths are mentioned in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and they were for the purpose of making people keep their word solemnly pledged before the Lord. But Jesus sweeps away oaths altogether. He says don't make oaths at all. Why do you need to? In v.34, don't swear an oath by substitutes for God, like heaven, or the earth, or by Jerusalem or even your head. You've got no control over those things. Why are you swearing by these things at all, Jesus says. Just be truthful, let your yes be yes and your no, no. As kingdom people your word, simply said, should be truthful. The Pharisees had developed this formula concerning God's name. If you made a vow using God's name then you had to keep it. But if you haven't used God's name then it didn't matter so much. Jesus says the Kingdom person is truthful in whatever they say. You can see how if this example of speaking truthfully was really kept by husband and wife it would do much to keep the marriage from getting to the stage of divorce.

Throughout this chapter, Jesus is not just giving moral commands. He is unveiling a whole new way of being human. Be salt and light! Don't worry about debating how far you can go without sinning. Far more important to think about how to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. No wonder it looks strange but Jesus himself lived it and invited us to follow in his footsteps.

**Retribution** – Again, you have heard it said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”. But I tell you do not resist an evil person. The Purpose of the law, “eye for an eye” was to halt the never ending cycle of revenge. To stop vendettas.

The way the Pharisees used it was, “yeah, you can get someone back, and then you haven't broken the law.” But it still has the potential to go on and on doesn't it? So Jesus says I offer you a new standard of justice, a creative, healing justice that will restore things not just even the score with your enemy. He says better to have no

vengeance at all, but rather a creative way forward, reflecting the astonishingly patient love of God himself, who wants Israel to shine his light into the world so that all people will see that he is the one true God, and that his deepest nature is overflowing love. No other god encourages people to behave in a way like this!

So Jesus gives four examples or hints of the sort of thing he has in mind. To be struck on the right cheek, in that world, almost certainly meant being hit with the back of the right hand. That's not just violence, but an insult: it implies that you're an inferior, perhaps a slave, a child, or (in that world, and sometimes even today) a woman. What's the answer? Hitting back only keeps the evil in circulation. Offering the other cheek implies: hit me again if you like, but now as an equal, not an inferior.

And so Jesus says act in a similar way when you are being sued, or forced to carry goods for the occupation force, the Romans. The principle is don't fret and fume, and plot revenge – leave that to God. Copy God in the generous way he operates. The thing is, think about your situations – what would it mean to reflect God's generous love despite the pressure and provocation, despite your own anger and frustration. You reject every form of retaliation. These examples are not detailed regulations that Jesus is suggesting, what Jesus is saying is these are illustrations of a principle. That principle is love, the selfless love of a person who, when injured, refuses to satisfy himself by taking revenge, but seeks to return good for evil as much as he can.

Sounds impossible! Well God, who is perfect, might act in this way, but how can we? Yes, it is impossible! But again Jesus' teaching here isn't just good advice, it's good news. Jesus did it all himself. And opened up the new way of being human so that all who follow him, who repent and come into the kingdom, become kingdom people;

well, they too can discover it. Remember, when they mocked Jesus, he didn't respond. When they challenged him, he told parables and stories that forced them to think differently. When they struck him, he took the pain. When they put the worst bit of Roman equipment on his back – the heavy crosspiece on which he would be killed – he carries it out of the city to the place of his own execution. When they nailed him to the cross, he prayed for them.

**Love your enemy:** So as Jesus comes to the last of his 6 examples of the Pharisees' teaching in v.43 he quotes a teaching which had become standard in his time. Yes we are to love our neighbour; but for the teachers they could justify from the Old Testament that there were many groups of people who were not God's people, were Gentiles, and so they were God's enemies. And if they're God's enemies, then they must be our enemies. In other words let's lower the bar, we only have to love some people, our neighbours. But Jesus says, just like your heavenly Father, just like me as you've seen me walking here on earth, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This is what Kingdom people do.

It's interesting as we come to this last verse. When Jesus wants to point them to perfect righteousness he points them to the Father, not to the law. How is perfection measured, not by the standards of the law but by the model of our perfect heavenly Father.

When Jesus shows the Jews how far short their intentions have gone he doesn't say go away and do a better job of law-keeping, he points them to their Father in heaven and encourages them to be like their Father. The law itself is not a bad thing and the law as Jesus interpreted it reveals the perfect character of our perfect God. But law-keeping is not the way to honour the law this side of the cross. The first step to honouring the law is to receive the Lord who fulfils it. He fulfilled it by living out

that true intention. But most importantly he fulfilled it by giving of himself as the great sacrifice of atonement. To achieve the kind of righteousness that the law could only point. The law could only foreshadow a human being standing before God with an unblemished record. It took a sacrifice of atonement at the cross to deal with our law failures and our law-breaking and present us blameless before God.

As we finish today you may still be thinking, how can I be perfect? How can I really obey Jesus' command here in v.48. I found a helpful phrase from one guy. Restful dissatisfaction. So I rest in the righteousness that Jesus has given me by his death on the cross and that he is working in my life to change me. Yet at the same time I want to be dissatisfied with my imperfections. I rest in the assurance that Jesus has done all that is needed for me to be in God's family and I rest in the assurance that he is at work in me. 2 Cor 3:18 – we are “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord.” And in Hebrews 12:2 the writer there says “let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author (initiator) and perfecter of our faith”. He is the one who starts my faith when I trust in him and his death on the cross and he is the one who completes or perfects my faith. And I rest in the promise that ultimately we will be like him. But I am dissatisfied when I see immaturity or impurity in my heart, mind and life; I am dissatisfied with the state of this world apart from Christ; I am dissatisfied with loving less than the way Jesus loves. So a balance is needed, both things need to be there. A restful dissatisfaction.

God's spirit is at work in us. It is by God's spirit that we are marked out as his sons and daughters and it is by the spirit that we grow as his children. So as God's children led by God's spirit we are empowered to grow to be like our Father.

Christians are not law-keepers, Christians are Father-imitators.