

God Wants Me To Do WHAT?

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Matthew 5:38-48 — “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your own kin, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

So, there’s this idea called “biblical literalism.” Essentially, it means that whenever you’re reading the Bible, there’s going to be a plain, clear, straightforward meaning to the passage that you’re reading, and you should always interpret biblical passages in the plainest, clearest, most straightforward way possible. It’s an idea that leads some Christians to get upset when, for example, scholars say that Genesis 1 and 2 were written as a form of poetry, not as scientific accounts of the earth’s creation. Most biblical literalists would say that this is nonsense, or heresy, or both. *The Bible says, “Now it was evening and morning, the first day...and the second day...and the third day” and so on — don’t you realize that the word “day” just means day? And it’s precisely the same idea that led many Christians (including scholars) to oppose Nicolaus Copernicus 500 years ago. What do you mean the earth revolves around the sun? In Psalm 93, the Bible says that “the Lord has established the earth, and it shall never be moved.” Don’t you realize that God said the earth shall never be moved? The idea of biblical literalism can be hard to square with metaphorical language and allegories, hard to square with the notion that a verse can have multiple meanings, and hard to square with the practice of contextualizing a passage. No no, what it meant back then is what it means now, and whatever plain meaning I see in it now, that’s what it means.*

There are many ways to go about challenging a biblical literalist mindset — which, personally, I think is flawed and dangerous. And one of the easiest ways to do so, to challenge this idea, is simply to read our passage this morning, this excerpt from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and then say to the biblical literalists, “Well, what are you waiting for? Hop to it!” Almost certainly, they’ll put the breaks on. They’ll start qualifying the passage in various ways and saying that there’s more to it than meets the eye. *Well, I know it says, “Do not resist an evildoer;” “Turn the other cheek,” and “Give to everyone who begs from you,” but it doesn’t REALLY mean that! And all of a sudden, the people who have been insisting that the waters of Scripture are perfectly clear and clean, they themselves are muddying the waters.*

And I don't blame them. I myself wouldn't mind having some muddy waters here, because I'm not sure how much I like what I'm seeing. Like the biblical literalists, and like most Christians, I feel a little troubled when I read this passage. Is Jesus telling us that when someone wants to take advantage of us or even when someone is trying to abuse us, we're supposed to just take it? Does God want me to be a doormat? The perfect doormat?

I don't think so, no. And in fact, the meaning of a few of these lines here may not be quite as troubling as they at first seem — at least according to some scholars. The idea of turning the other cheek, for example, may have originally had a different meaning than what we assume today. It may have been a somewhat defiant gesture, actually: some scholars say that, back then, if a man was striking another man on the right cheek, as the text says, it means that he was using a back-hand slap with his right hand. People wouldn't have used their left hand to touch a person in public, because the left hand was considered unclean — you only used your left hand in private, if you get my drift. Now, a back-hand slap was considered an especially degrading way to hit someone. So, the act of turning the other cheek — that is, turning your left cheek towards the assailant and your right cheek away from him — is meant to prevent the person from striking like that twice. It would be a way of saying “No” — peacefully yet forcefully — to being treated in this degrading way.

Similarly, some scholars say that there's more than meets the eye to the line about giving your cloak when someone sues you to take your coat. Some scholars point to the fact that most people back then just wore two garments of clothing: a cloak over their whole body and a coat over that if it was cold. The scenario in this passage, then, is that a person is standing in court, being sued for the very coat on their back, and in response, that person takes off their cloak as well, basically stripping down in the court and handing over all of their clothes, thereby exposing the greed and heartlessness of someone who would sue for a coat. It would be a disarming form of defiance, peaceful yet prophetic.

Perhaps these scholars are right, and our passage this morning isn't as doormat-y as it seems. Perhaps they're wrong. Turns out, the waters of Scripture are indeed muddy — at least on this side of life. But even if these non-traditional interpretations that promote defiance are correct, this passage still puts some pretty clear limits on that defiance. Whatever turning the other cheek means, it definitely does not mean hitting back. There is no place for violent retaliation in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. What's more, there is no place for hatred of someone in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus rejects, and urges his followers to reject, not only external physical violence against another person, but also “internal violence of the spirit” — to use Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase.

Friends, at the heart of Jesus' ethic, at the heart of his teaching, is this one command: love your enemies. It's as plain and simple as the Bible gets — and of course, it's still plenty complex. What does it mean to love those who have willfully wounded me, those who have been a force of evil in my life? What does it mean to love those who I believe are a force of evil in this world?

What does that look like? I think that you and I are meant to wrestle with these questions for as long as we live. This morning, my short-hand answer is it looks like God: our God who loves perfectly, our God who is Love. Our passage this morning ends by saying, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” As one commentator says, “Perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves.” Friends, may we labor, each and every day, to let more and more of God’s perfect love — love for ourselves, love for our enemies, love for all that God has created — fill us up, pour into our hearts, so that we may pour it back out into our world. Amen.