

LESSONS IN LOVE



“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 one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would 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 sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

(Matthew 5:38–48)

JESUS HERE ALLUDES TO AN OLD TESTAMENT MANDATE (SEE Exodus 21:24) that was meant to limit retributions for wrongdoing. It allowed punishments that were commensurate with

the evil inflicted, so as to keep people from escalating violence. But, Jesus gives us a greater command that can stop the cycle of evil in its tracks: Rather than doing to your enemy what he has done to you, love him.

Jesus is not disposing of legitimate pursuits of justice in serious matters. A judge must penalize wrongdoers. A teacher must establish boundaries with her students, and penalties for wrongdoing are part of that process. An employer expects those who work for him to follow the standards he has established, and those who fail to meet his legitimate expectations should not be surprised to see a decrease in salary or loss of their job. These kinds of penalties are elements of a just and well-ordered society.

What Jesus is looking at is our heart, our motivation. He is speaking about our reactions to the selfishness, anger, hatred and bitterness that we experience. A Christian will *decide* not to further a wrongdoing by retaliation. He or she will seek to work out a problem by talking directly to the offending person—and only that person. On occasion we may need to seek advice in order to remedy a situation, but here we must be discerning. Is that a cloak to cover our desire to vent? Are we hoping to involve others in our defense? Gossip, calumny and slander are not the means of resolving wrongdoing.

The decision to “turn the other cheek” takes grace, and if we ask for grace, God will give it to us. He will give us the wisdom and strength to forget self and pursue peace—not peace at any price but peace based on charity and justice.

Is this hard? Of course it is. But God never commands without imparting power and the necessary gifts to carry out

his Word. Our biggest problem is that we do not expect his help; we do not ask for it. We simply *react*.

We need self-control to *respond*, not react, to the painful words and actions of others. Ask God for this; it takes practice but yields the fruit of peace. We can become channels of peace through honest and frank discussion.

We must take our injuries to the heart of God and ask him to carry them, so they do not fester in us. Ask God for the courage to love the person who has offended you. Someday, maybe a year or two from now, the person may come to you and in some way express sorrow for the injury. If your heart has remained in prayer for the person and you have chosen to remain open to God's working through you, you will see fruit.

Having said all that and having seen the fruit of following God's Word in relationships, nevertheless I have to say that I still have one unresolved relationship in my life. I continue to pray for the other person, but I also pray for myself, that I may not yield to bitterness or hopelessness. Let us struggle together. God will not be outdone in generosity. He "richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:18; see Luke 6:38).

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn wrote: "To love wherever we encounter love is nothing special. We find that easy. But to have goodwill toward the one who does us evil, this makes us like God, who is good to all whether they thank him or not. Moreover, history and our own experience show one thing: Revenge has never brought about peace. Somebody has to make the beginning of venturing the step toward the other person. And Jesus thinks that I should be that somebody."¹

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS



“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.”

(Matthew 6:24–34)

MANY PEOPLE TRY TO SERVE GOD AND AT THE SAME TIME CATER to their own flesh and the world's agenda. Theirs is a very insecure and vulnerable position, like having one foot on the dock and one foot in the boat. Look at your life from this perspective. Are your two feet firmly planted in God's kingdom? What can you do if they're not?

I hope you decide to choose God and his kingdom. Then you will begin to experience the blessings he describes in this passage from the Gospel. Notice that he doesn't promise wealth but that our needs will be met. He uses examples from nature. If the Father cares so well for animals and plants, how much more should we be assured that our Father will care for us human beings!

In order to experience this care, Jesus tells us, we are to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." That is, we are to put our time and energy into *obeying the commandments*, *growing in virtue* and *repenting when we fail*. Then we will know God's love and provision.

Not long ago a small red-winged blackbird died after flying into our living room window. I looked at that tiny creature, and surprisingly, tears came to my eyes. I was sorrowful that anything had to die, but at the same time my tears came from the joy of realizing that God knew that particular bird had died. He knew and cared! How much more then, he tells us, does he know everything about us, and how much more will he care for us. We are his precious sons and daughters. "Trust me!" he says. "Follow me!"

WHERE DOES YOUR HOUSE STAND?



“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’

“Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

(Matthew 7:21–28)

THIS IS A HARD SET OF VERSES TO READ, AND THEY ARE VERSES that need to be pondered. A hasty reading means you may miss the message.

First the passage tells us that saying many prayers does not assure us of God's pleasure now or on Judgment Day. We can pray multitudinous words and have them count for nothing. We can even serve day in and day out the needs of others. We can be known for good works and gain nothing in the sight of God!

What pleases the Lord? What does count? He wants us to *hear* his words and *do* them.

I suggest you ask yourself some searching questions: Do I pray, love and serve in order to accomplish God's will, to be more and more conformed to his likeness? Or do I pray, love and serve in order that others will think well of me? Do I think that I accumulate "brownie points" by my prayers and service?

Let's be honest with ourselves. Our pride gets in the way—a lot! The tendency of our fallen human nature is to compete, to strive to get ahead, by good means or foul. We can bring that spirit of competition into spiritual matters as well. It's called hypocrisy, and it does not serve or please God.

God always looks at the heart, the intention, when we work and pray. We need to make sure that we are building our houses, that is, our lives, on the rock that is Christ. We must treasure his Word and his sacraments to be secure in Christ.

Several years ago in California there were some terrible storms. The rain water and the wind demolished many homes that were built on hillsides. Those homes had not been built with appropriate precautions. There was very little land surrounding them, so they had no secure foundation. Realtors sold the homes based on the view or on the celebrities the owners would encounter in the neighborhood. The owners allowed themselves to be dazzled by fancy promises.

Many of us act in a similar way with our lives, our immortal souls. We become dazzled by the world's promises and then consumed by them. To the extent that we allow that, we are building on sand. On the other hand, Jesus' Word, the commandments, the sacraments, the love and service we give to those in need—all with the right intentions—form the rock on which we can build with confidence.

Verse 28 says that everyone was “astonished” at Jesus' teaching. Why? Because his teaching came with conviction and with a great love for the Father. People heard it and were attracted. They saw goodness; they witnessed peace and confidence.

The scribes and the Pharisees knew the Law inside and out. Their observance of it was strict and sterile, not based on love but on a desire to be praised, to be thought well of. That is sand!

How solid is the foundation of your house? Are you talking the talk *and* walking the walk?