

Sunday 21 July 2015

Otumoetai Baptist Church

Counter Cultural: Loving Limitlessly is living like Jesus

Matthew 5:38-48

(BLACK)

Over this past week I've noticed a little yellow light that's started flashing on my car's dashboard. I've ignored it for a bit, thinking it will just go away and get better by itself, but well it hasn't. So I've thought, "hmmmm I better do something about this."

Not being a car guy at all – what's an alternator, where do I even start when I want to change a clutch? – I thought the best place to start would be the instruction manual, right? Anyone else like me out there? Born with two left hands, not a practical bone in your body? Okay, good.

The problem is though that the car I'm using, which is my mother in laws – so that just ups the ante to make sure it doesn't break down or cause further damage! – didn't come with an instruction manual.

Enter the internet and this amazing site called Google. I typed in the car's make and model plus instruction manual and hey presto, all these results came back.

(SLIDE 1)

I clicked on the first instruction manual and started pouring

through the contents of it. I found the section on 'dashboard' and looked at the little icons to see if anything resembled the yellow light that was flashing.

I found one that looked similar so I went out to the car and took a picture of the yellow light, probably should have done that earlier!, came back in and checked to see if the two signals matched.

They didn't.

I went to the start of the instruction manual, looked at the picture of the car on the front and realised, hold on a minute, this car has four doors, whereas mine only has two doors. This car is a different size and shape to mine.

And boy did I feel silly! In my haste to try and solve this problem I rushed to the first instruction manual that I could find. Instead of looking carefully for the right one and the right manual, I opted for the quickest result.

So that's me and cars. We don't really mix. But anyway, I have found with cars that the easiest and most efficient way of diagnosing a problem and getting step by step instructions in how to remedy the problem is by asking someone else or by looking at the instructions and studying the directions.

And you know, I think it's the same in how we deal with an especially daunting task or relationship by looking over and studying the directions in the right instruction manual, the Bible.

(SLIDE 2)

This is especially true when we are looking at how we respond to those who hurt us.

It seems like we live in a society of raw power: the one with the strongest fists or the most guns wins. People in gangs gain respect by fear and intimidation. Bullies in the playground do the same. As do countries that have nuclear weapons at their disposal. Sometimes it appears that we live by a motto that says "I don't get mad, I get even."

We want to fight back. We want justice. We want the other person or people to pay. And this is typically a fairly *natural* response we have when we are hurt.

However, as followers of Christ, we are called to live a "**supernatural**" life. Our lives are to be different to the rest of the world. To be counter cultural if you like.

(SLIDE 3)

'Counter culture' is what we've named this series on the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus preached to his disciples.

And boy is his sermon challenging!

I've been reading, re-reading and trying to apply the Sermon on the Mount in my life. It's hard to live up to, yet it's the standard that God expects of those who choose to follow him.

Let's briefly look back at what we've seen in Jesus' sermon so far.

He starts with the Beatitudes, nine different values or characteristics that describe those who live in God's Kingdom.

He then moves onto how we can live as salt and light to enhance and illuminate the lives of people around us.

Then Jesus talks about the law and how he came not to abolish it but to fulfil the law.

After this Jesus shifts gear and brings up six different components of the law that were being misunderstood and misapplied by the religious teachers of his day.

In a sense they were getting head knowledge, but no heart transformation. Sure, externally they were changing, but internally they were still living with faulty motivations.

So the first thing Jesus tackles is anger. Jesus tells us that it's not good enough just not to murder someone, we also mustn't be angry at them.

Next he moves on to adultery. It's not good enough just not to commit the act of adultery, we also mustn't even think lustfully about another person.

Then he addresses divorce. It's not good enough to divorce someone for anything, except if there is sexual immorality in the marriage.

Jesus then tells us it's not good enough to only tell the truth and keep our promises when we are under oath, but we must do it all the time and let our 'yes' be yes and our 'no' be no.

Which brings us to the passage we're focusing on today, often known as one of the hardest bits of Jesus' teachings. It's about how we respond to people who hurt us.

So let's look at our instruction manual for dealing with this issue in our lives. Head to Matthew chapter 5 verses 38 – 48.

(SLIDE 4)

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. And if someone takes you to court to sue for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one kilometre, carry it two kilometres. When someone asks you for something, give it to him; when someone wants to borrow something, lend it

to him.

(SLIDE 5)

You have heard that it was said, "Love your friends, hate your enemies." But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the sons of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!

You must be perfect – just as your Father in heaven is perfect!

Wow, there's a lot in these eleven verses. Jesus is laying down his standard of discipleship pretty high. In a sense he's saying that his disciples are to love others limitlessly if they are to live like Him.

(SLIDE 6)

When you love limitlessly, you are living like Jesus.

Ok, so how do we do this? Especially when people hurt us or insult us.

Well, first, let me ask you an honest question, what do you want to do when someone does something wrong by you?

There's no need to answer that aloud, but I think if we're honest when we are wronged by someone our natural instinct is that we want to get back at them, we want to teach them a lesson.

(SLIDE 7)

Jesus addresses this view when he says, "You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." He is quoting the law of retaliation, found in the Old Testament.

(SLIDE 8)

Leviticus 24:19-20

if anyone injures another person, whatever he has done shall be done to him. If he breaks a bone, one of his bones shall be broken; if he blinds him in one eye, one of his eyes shall be blinded; if he knocks out a tooth, one of his teeth shall be knocked out. Whatever injury he causes another person shall be done to him in return.

Deuteronomy 19:21

the punishment is to be a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot.

Some say that the Old Testament law was savage and bloodthirsty, but this is not true. It was the beginning of mercy and is the foundational law for all civilization. Although it allowed for retaliation, it placed boundaries on it by setting limits.

The law was intended as an equalizer of justice. People could only get back what they lost and it limited retaliation.

For example, it didn't allow one's whole family to get in on the act. When wronged, we tend to line up our friends or family to retaliate. In ancient times if a person cut off my ear, I want to cut off his head. And if I cut off his head, his brother wants to kill me, and if he kills me, my brother will kill his brother and so on until pretty soon we have a massive clan-scale war on our hands.

So what seemed like a blood-hungry law was actually a way of limiting violence and bloodshed.

Up on the mount, Jesus' followers were probably not surprised that he's quoting an important passage from the law, but what he says next must have shocked them.

(SLIDE 9)

"But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you."

Jesus is saying, "Don't retaliate at all when someone wrongs you." Jesus is talking about revenge here, not self-preservation. He isn't telling us to be weak and passive; He's telling us not to be vindictive.

Jesus wants us to ask ourselves the question, if someone does something wrong to me, how may I respond in love in return? It's pretty safe to say that Jesus' style of discipleship is not for spiritual wimps. It's only for those sure of who they are.

Okay Jesus, you tell us not to retaliate, so what is it that you want us to do?

He gives four real-life examples. Here's his first illustration:

(SLIDE 10)

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too.

In Jesus' day a slap to one's face was considered a huge insult by the Jews, and was among the most demeaning acts one could inflict on another person. Receiving the back of the hand meant that you were scorned as inconsequential – a nothing.

So Jesus is saying that when someone insults you, do not seek revenge. Don't trade insults, even if it means you receive more. You must avoid retaliation and revenge.

When you love limitlessly you are living like Jesus.

Jesus did not live tit for tat. If you have a good read through the four gospels you will see that He wasn't interested in getting revenge. Jesus was not concerned about His reputation. Are you willing to leave retaliation at the Cross?

In his second illustration, Jesus says:

(SLIDE 11)

If someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him

have your coat as well.

It was possible in Jesus' day to sue someone for the very shirt on their back. However, no one could take another person's coat, as this was an indispensable piece of clothing that the poor would use to cover them while they slept.

So what exactly is Jesus saying this time? Well, as they sue you for your shirt and win it, give them your coat too, even though they cannot legally take it.

This is a startling demand for his disciples.

When you love limitlessly, you are living like Jesus.

Instead of defending themselves or seeking retaliation, Jesus' disciples must give to this person who is so unfairly attempting to take their most basic necessities. This is supremely counter-cultural and is meant to point one's persecutors to Christ.

In his third illustration, Jesus says:

(SLIDE 12)

If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one kilometre, carry it two kilometres.

In Jesus' day, Roman soldiers had the authority to command civilians to carry their loads for one mile. However, Roman law said that a person only had to do this service for one mile and then they were free to go.

The Jewish people would have measured the mile in steps: one thousand exactly. And they counted every single step. Then when they got to one thousand they stopped, put down the pack, and left the Roman to carry his own load or find another person to help out. The Jews hated the Romans making them carry their loads.

Jesus' point is "Don't behave like this. Offer to go another mile. Give your opponent more than he has the right to demand. Go beyond what is expected or demanded!"

When you love limitlessly, you are living like Jesus.

When your boss gives you a difficult project that is too much to bear, seek to serve him or her.

If your boss treats you unfairly, honour him or her and find out how you can go that extra mile.

Use your life to point others to Christ.

In his final illustration, Jesus says:

(SLIDE 13)

When someone asks you for something, give it to him; when

someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him.

This relates to the law of lending. All debts were cancelled in the seventh year. The borrowers loved this; the lenders were not so enthusiastic about it. The closer the seventh year got, the more tight-fisted businessmen became.

But Jesus said his disciples were not to allow the seventh year to govern them. Whenever someone had a need, God's people were to give generously. For people in Jesus' day were not after home improvement loans; they needed money for basic things like food and clothing.

So Jesus is referring to people in legitimate need. As his disciples, it is our responsibility to practice generosity and give to these people, even though there is the real possibility that we might not get our money or stuff back.

(SLIDE 14)

When you love limitlessly, you are living like Jesus.

If you're sitting here thinking "How on earth do we do this?" It all sounds pretty tough doesn't it, this whole living like Jesus thing? We don't want to turn the other cheek because it damages our pride and reputation.

We don't want to give our coat when someone demands our shirt, because we don't want to lose our possessions, our stuff.

We don't want to go the extra mile, because our time is too precious.

We don't want to give or lend, because this is an inconvenience to us.

The focus is on us and our needs. But Jesus is saying, "Flip this mind-set over. Start living counter-culturally. Love limitlessly."

Jesus never said that following him was going to be easy. But he did say it would be worth it and we would have life to the full.

I struggle with this stuff. Just over the past few weeks, Roxy and I refused letting our house out to certain people because we were afraid that they would mess it up and the kids would create havoc.

We were so concerned with our stuff and our possessions that we missed an opportunity to do what Jesus has commanded his followers to do.

Now obviously there is discretion needed and Jesus is not calling his followers to be doormats for people. But he is saying that we need to change our focus and seek to serve people around us.

(SLIDE 15)

Let's come back to Jesus' sermon and see where he next challenges us:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your friends, hate your enemies." But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the sons of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!

When I read this verse on loving our enemies, my mind goes back to my high school days. There was a boy in my year group, whose sole purpose at school seemed to be to make my life a living hell.

He would hurl insults at me, criticize the way I looked and dressed, make snarky remarks, and call me names that I won't repeat here but have been etched onto my heart.

I can't remember doing anything to him, but it just seemed like he had it out for me and wanted me to feel bad about myself.

This is the closest to an enemy that I've had in my life.

And I've gotta be honest, Jesus telling me to love him is actually really hard for me to do. Maybe you can relate to this.

Even as I've been preparing this message I've struggled with thoughts and emotions associated with my time of bullying at school. I don't think I've ever prayed for this boy. In fact, I've probably wished that something bad has happened to him.

That's not too good.

So if you're sitting here wondering *how on earth* can we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, you're not alone.

But equally I think that if we try to do this in *earthly* ways we will fail miserably. As I've said earlier, our natural response is to retaliate, to fight back, and to get even. But as followers of Christ we are called to live a **supernatural** life.

That means our hope, our energy, our inspiration, our motivation needs to come from above.

God has given us the awesome gift of his Holy Spirit to guide us, comfort us and strengthen us in the journey.

When I take my hands off the steering wheel of my life and pray a prayer like God, Holy Spirit, take over this aspect of my life and give me the strength to love this person as you love him or her, guess what? It actually works! Maybe not straight away, but little by little you will feel your heart soften towards that person and you will see God at work in you to bring about that inward

change.

Which is what Jesus is trying to accomplish here in the Sermon on the Mount!

He's going after our hearts. With his unstoppable, unbreakable, uncompromising love.

And he wants us to love our enemies with kindness. With generosity. Without limits.

Jesus says that tax collectors – who were the most despised people in his society – love the people who love them, so if you only love the people who are nice to you, who show you kindness, who are friendly towards you, then how is your love any different to theirs?

Your love must surpass that of the tax collector.

(SLIDE 16)

Ask yourself these questions:

Is there something unique about your love that cannot be explained in natural terms?

Is there something special and unique about your love that is not present in the life of an unbeliever?

When you love limitlessly, you are living like Jesus.

As we wrap up today let's see how Jesus concludes this passage.

Verse 48 says "Try your best at these things and see how you go."

Wait a minute, no it doesn't! It says:

(SLIDE 17)

"You must be perfect – just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

So is the goal perfection? My theology tells me that one day we'll be perfect once we see Jesus face to face and go to live with him forever, but what about now? What's he getting at here?

All this loving your enemies stuff is tough, it can sometimes seem impossible. Turning the other cheek; going the extra mile; giving our coat; lending our stuff. It goes against our natural desire for retaliation; to get even, to make someone pay for what they've done to us.

We are called to live like Jesus. The only true perfect human being. So how do we do this? How do we put together the demands of Scripture with the realities of life?

When we look at Jesus' requirements for us, we rightfully ask "can we do this?" But that's the wrong question to focus on. The first and most important question to answer is "Can I answer

Jesus' call to discipleship?" And if you answer that with a resounding yes, you automatically answer the question, "Can I carry out Jesus' discipleship demands?"

You've already decided that you'll obey Jesus' commands, so the question is not will you live this life, but **how** will you live this life of discipleship.

And that's what the Sermon on the Mount is. It's a call to discipleship. A call to live counter-culturally. A call to love others, despite what they do to us. A call to love our enemies. A call to live like Jesus.

(SLIDE 18)

And when we love limitlessly, we are living like Jesus.

Let's pray.

(Time to pray for our enemies, those making our lives difficult, those who are persecuting us.)