

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. The title for today’s sermon is “Everything is backwards” and comes from the Gospel reading, Matthew chapter 5. Let us pray.... Amen.

It’s my right! Can there be any words more sacred to 21st century Canadians, or for that matter, North Americans, who instinctively worship at the altar of self? We hear these words, sometimes we even say these words, to get what we want and when things are not going as we would most like. When evil things happen to us we want our rights protected at all costs. We cling to Scripture, passages like from the Gospel reading today; “**An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth**”(Matthew 5:38) to justify our rights and our actions. But really, we much prefer the original text from Exodus (21:23-25) “**But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.**” Now that is what I’m talking about: our rights for vengeance. People have always expected to find their own dominion, honour, and advantage in the Gospel, and an escape from all suffering.

And why wouldn't we? We see it in popular television shows and movies like Batman, Wolverine, superheroes with a dark side, people who aren’t afraid to push the boundaries while exercising their right to the vengeance they feel they deserve, and these ones and their actions are put on pedestals. Watching them repaying eye for eye, and tooth for tooth gets the blood pumping, the excitement flowing, and the brain thinking what we could do.

We are quick to declare our rights when others infringes on what we perceive to be our rights, our god given rights. Which god doesn’t matter as long as we are satisfied with the results; as long as justice is executed, and executed swiftly and in full measure.

Yet, as we read today’s Gospel reading, Jesus words slap us in the face and cut us to the core. Jesus says “You have heard that it was said, ‘**An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.**’<sup>39</sup> **But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.** <sup>40</sup> **And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.** <sup>41</sup> **And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.** <sup>42</sup> **Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. ... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**”(Matthew 5:38-42, 44) Jesus’ words are entirely backwards to how we are told and encouraged to live our lives. “Do not resist the one who is evil....if someone insults you, let them do it again... don’t sue the pants off anyone you have the opportunity to... just take it the abuse and don’t fight back, but pray for them?” What?

But Jesus’ words stand... and along with the rest of Scripture, together they illuminate the very serious spiritual situation those are in who fervently grasp their rights to live their lives

in full defense of their rights... because they are the walking dead. A slap on the cheek deserves a punch in the nose; just ask any olympic hockey player, or any player at the local rink. To be generous and willing to be taken advantage of is seen as an invitation for abuse; the world sees it as a sign of weakness or cowardice, both are considered character flaws. But God’s Word stands: to be grudging, ungenerous, and unwilling even to go the first mile with the one who forces you, is to flirt with eternal damnation.

But before we get any further, we need to pause and look at the enormity of what Jesus is saying here. This text is a difficult one. Jesus’ words here have given rise to many questions and errors when people have failed to distinguish properly between the secular and the spiritual, between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world. When these two are confused instead of being clearly and accurately separated, Jesus’ words remain hidden and obscure.

There are two kingdoms. By birth you are a member of an earthly or secular kingdom, for us: Canada. In this secular kingdom you have certain rights and there are certain expectations and obligations required of you. Also, through your rebirth by water and God’s Word; in Holy Baptism God made you a member of the kingdom of Christ. In this kingdom you are under the rule of no one but Christ Himself. And here is the tension; as a Christian you are a member of both kingdoms until you die.

Now going back, today’s Gospel is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which He directed against the Pharisees, those who were misleading the people in both doctrine and life and were misinterpreting and distorting God’s commandment in such a way as to produce only counterfeit saints. The same teaching continues today in some churches. Now, the Pharisees teaching only dealt with the sin and piety that was manifest in outward works. They had taken this text of “an eye for an eye” and distorted it and confused it by applying it to themselves, though it was addressed only to the government.

So Christ comes along and demolished their perverted idea and false interpretation. Jesus was not tampering with the responsibility and authority of the government; instead, Jesus was teaching His individual Christians, us included, as how to live personally, apart from our official position and authority. We should not desire revenge at all. We should have the attitude that if someone hits us on one cheek, we are ready, if need be, to turn the other cheek to them as well, restraining the vindictiveness not only of our fist but also of our heart, our thoughts, and all our powers as well. In other words, what Jesus wants is a heart that will neither be impatient nor wreak vengeance nor disturb the peace. Such a righteousness is different from the one the Pharisees taught and maintained. They wanted to deck themselves out with what they found in Moses, claiming that revenge and self-defense were proper against violence, since the text reads: “**Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.**” They just seemed to forget about God clearly declaration saying: “**Vengeance is mine**”(Deuteronomy 32:35)

Yet, Jesus was not forbidding all Christians any resistance to evil. Countries have laws in place and set punishments for those who break the law. If Jesus were to say that all must not resist any evil then it would be necessary to put up with everybody’s insolence. Personal safety and private property would be impossible and in the end society would collapse. Also, parents are called to defend and protect their children, as all Christians are called to defend the helpless, but never in a vengeful, vindictive, or slanderous way.

In the same way, it is the duty and obligation of the government and those set in position of authority to administer the law and its just punishment. This way everything will be in good shape, and everyone will know what they are to do and to have; no one will meddle in another person’s stuff or pry into their affairs or take their property. That is what lawyers are for, to teach and manage such matters. The danger here is that the wicked world, along with our flesh and blood, always seeks its own advantage and yet puts on a lovely front to hide the scoundrel within. Still, there is no problem to report injustice and violence, just as long as you do not have a false heart, but one that remains as patient as it was before, one that is doing this only to maintain the right and to avoid the wrong, out of a genuine love for righteousness. This is how it ought to be.

Still, the Gospel, the kingdom of Christ, does not trouble itself with these matters. It teaches about the right relation of the heart to God. Christ is talking here about a spiritual existence and life and He is addressing Himself to His Christians. He is telling you and I to live and behave before God and in the world with our heart dependent upon God and uninterested in things like power or punishment, or anger or revenge.

But you may say: “All right. But still Christ says here in plain words: ‘Do not resist evil.’ It sounds rather obvious that this is being absolutely forbidden.” The answer is: Yes, but pay attention to whom Jesus is saying this. He is not saying: “No one should ever resist evil”; for that would completely undermine all rule and authority. But this is what Christ is saying: “You, you shall not do it.” Now, who are these “you”? You are the disciples of Christ, whom He is teaching about your personal lives, apart from the secular government. Being a Christian is something quite different from holding and administering a secular office or position. Therefore Christ intends to say: “Leave the resistance of evil, the administration of justice, and punishment to the one who holds a position in the secular realm, as the lawyers and the laws instruct you to do. But to you, My disciples, whom I am not teaching about ruling outwardly but about living before God, I say: You shall not resist evil. You shall put up with all sorts of things and maintain a pure and friendly heart toward those who treat you unjustly or roughly. If someone takes your coat, you shall not seek revenge. Rather, if there is nothing you can do to prevent it, you shall let him take your cloak as well.”

With the God's Law set before our eyes and His righteous demands placed upon us, we are reminded of the greatness of our trespasses against God, of the consequences of our sins, and of our inability to save ourselves. With God's Law clearly proclaimed in our ears; "**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**" and "**You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**"(Matthew 5:44,48) we know that we would be eternally condemned for our actions and inactions against God. Our righteousness does not exceed that of the Pharisees because we, like them, are sinners, conceived and born in sin. We are not anywhere close to perfect, and God does not grade on a curve. Rather, "**Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.**"(James 2:10) It is either all or nothing, and you, me, and all people have nothing.

Yet still this is why God sent His only Son, Christ Jesus, into our world. Not to pat us on the head and say our sin is alright. "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners."(1 Timothy 1:15) He came to fulfill the Law, to fulfill the full and complete demands of the Law, and to suffer and die on the cross in your place and mine. Jesus came and was killed for your transgression, buried for your sins, but rose for your salvation. He gives you that gift through baptism and keeps you in it and continues to strengthen you in it through the regular hearing of His Word and in the reception of His body and blood for the forgiveness of all your sins. It is by Christ's blood that you can suffer the persecution and taunting of this world; it is through the cross of Christ that you can have died to the sinful demands of this world, and it is on account of Christ Jesus' resurrection you can live here in time, and with Him for eternity. Because of the gift of faith you have received and live in you are made perfect in the eyes of God, not because of your righteousness, but because of the righteousness of Christ wrapped around you.

Yes the expectations of God do appear as entirely backwards to the what the world demands, but in the words of Paul, "**For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.**"(1 Corinthians 1:18/Romans 1:15) You have been given this gift of faith, and in Christ your sins are forgiven and you have eternal life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from: Luther's Works: AE 21, pages 105-115.  
For more complete description of life in both kingdoms read the above cited work.

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