

TREAT PEOPLE AS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE (Part 2)**MATTHEW 5:38-48**

We're taking ten Sundays this fall to reflect on the greatest sermon ever preached: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Now, today is the second part of a two part message I'm calling "Treat People As Made In God's Image." Let's read together the passage we want to mull over today. Now, last week we learned that the key verse for this whole section of Jesus' message is back in v. 20. Jesus says there, "But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!" (NLT) The spiritual leaders in Jesus' day defined personal goodness or righteousness as just controlling bad, outward behavior like murder or adultery. Jesus said, no, real personal goodness begins with a transformed heart. Then Jesus provided several examples or illustrations of how the personal goodness of those who are His followers is vastly superior to the kind of personal goodness advocated by these leaders. All of the examples have to do with how we treat other people. For instance, personal goodness is more than just not murdering people you don't like. It's all about getting rid of hatred, self-centered anger, and contempt. It's more than just avoiding adultery. It's about getting rid of obsessive lust in our lives.

Jesus continues with that theme in the last part of chapter 5. What is real personal goodness? What does authentic righteousness look like? This is an incredible challenge to be different from the culture in which all of us live every day. Nowhere is the need to have your heart transformed spiritually, to be born again, and to be invaded by the Holy Spirit of God more clearly seen than in these verses. Again – and this is so important – Jesus isn't telling you how to become His follower. He's describing how all of His followers already act and react as they walk through this life. Increasingly they look like the portrait Jesus paints in these verses. And, to be more specific, increasingly they find ways to treat other people as made in God's image. As I reflect on these verses, it's clear to me that if you and I are going to treat people as those who are made in God's image, we will have to experience something supernatural inside of us.

GET DETACHED FROM YOURSELF.

Jesus takes the religious leaders of His day and time to task for misinterpreting the Old Testament. That was a big reason why most of them despised Jesus and eventually plotted His execution on the cross. Jesus claimed that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees made the Bible say what it never intended to say. The eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth interpretation was a good example. Does the Old Testament – God's Word - really advocate an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? Yep. "But if there is... injury, the punishment must match the injury: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot." (Ex 21:24 NLT) But, this was anything but a savage, bloodthirsty command to rain down revenge on someone who had hurt you. It was actually a legal principle to preserve justice. Some people over reacted when they were injured. If someone poked out your eye, you'd kill him in response. Basically, this law said, no, the punishment ought to fit the crime. Its purpose was to define what was just when it came to punishment and to control the kind of revenge that

was worse than the original injury. It was never taken literally even when it was first established. Nobody actually took out a person's eye if he was guilty of poking out someone else's eye. Instead, in most cases, a system of monetary fines was set up to compensate someone financially who had been injured.

So, what was the problem? The religious leaders had taken a principle God handed down for legal situations and tried to apply it to all personal relationships. They suggested this was an acceptable way to treat other people who had injured you. Jesus dared to oppose them by saying, in effect, "No, that is not what my Father intended. My followers – my disciples – don't treat people like that." And then, Jesus goes on to say, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person...." (Mt 5:39 NIV) What Jesus goes on to say here has been misinterpreted by many over the years. For example, it's been suggested that we should not have a military, a police force, or courts with judges because all of them resist evil people. Other have argued that Jesus' followers shouldn't fight in wars and that no one should face capital punishment for their crimes.

But, Jesus wasn't giving a lecture on social policy; He was preaching about personal relationships: how you and I treat people made in God's image. He's not talking about a government's effort to maintain law and order. He's not even suggesting that you're wrong to protect yourself from a deranged lunatic trying to kill you or to stop someone who is abusing a child. What is Jesus' point then? Jesus challenges assumptions that we all make about personal relationships by introducing four illustrative situations that would have been understood very easily by those living in His day and time. This is about dealing with people who are treating you unfairly. It's about the very human desire to strike back when you've been struck, to get revenge when you've been hurt, to get even when you've been wronged, and to insist that your rights be respected.

First example. Someone comes up and slaps you across the face with the back of his hand – a grave insult in Jesus' day. Jesus says His followers will respond by offering the other cheek to the one who insults you. A family with four very active boys heard their pastor preach one Sunday on this matter of turning the other cheek. He stressed that no matter what others do to us, we should never try to get even. That afternoon the youngest boy came into the house crying. Between sobs he told his mother he had kicked one of his brothers, who then kicked him in return. Mom said, "Well, I'm sorry you're hurt. But you shouldn't go around kicking people." The little boy said, "But the preacher said he isn't supposed to kick me back!" It's easy to misunderstand Jesus' teaching here. He's saying when someone intentionally insults you, don't retaliate. Don't plot your revenge. Don't insult in return. Don't internalize the insult and let it become this lump of resentment in your soul. As Jesus' followers, we have no God-given right to retaliate or seek revenge. That mindset requires a certain kind of personal detachment that is only possible if you're in the kingdom of God.

A second example. Someone wants to take away something that belongs to you – your dress or your coat. Jesus says give that person your overcoat as well. A third example. An occupying Roman soldier lays the flat of his spear on your shoulder when you're in town one afternoon – a common occurrence in Jesus' day – and commands you to

carry his belongings for a while. Jesus says carry the soldier's stuff an extra mile voluntarily. A fourth example. A person approaches you with some great financial need and asks for help. Do it, says Jesus. Give them the money. Extend a loan to them. How on earth do we apply these examples in Jesus' sermon to our lives today?

I see an underlying principle in all these examples. A follower of Jesus is detached. Detached? From what? Jesus calls you to get detached from yourself. Not detached from God certainly, certainly not detached from other people, not detached from life, but detached from your own natural self-centeredness. I believe right here Jesus is challenging this notion that we own anything be it our possessions, our time, or our money, because it is to those kind of things we get easily attached. For instance, does your physical, material, literal stuff belong to you or to God – your home, your clothes, your cars, your money? Well, the truth will be revealed by how you respond if and when someone wants to take something that you think belongs to you. OK, it's not likely a Roman soldier is going to demand you carry his shield today, but is there a principle there to apply to my life today? Sometimes people come into our lives wanting to use a very precious commodity called "time". How do you respond? Is your time really your time or is it God's time? Is your schedule your schedule or God's schedule? Jesus isn't saying that you should forfeit all time for yourself. He's not saying others should run your life. But Jesus is teaching that His followers know when to make themselves available to others willingly even when it's inconvenient. They realize all my time is really God's time. By the same token, all my money is God's money. If someone is asking for money from me, they're asking for God's money not my money.

So often you and I get irritated by the things that happen to us in life because we are so incredibly self-centered. We think we have a right to retaliation and revenge, but Jesus implies, "In the Kingdom of God, you don't have rights." That demands a level of detachment from yourself. I get annoyed if I think people are making demands on my time, my energies, and my money. Jesus implies, "My followers don't own anything." We don't own the hours in our own days – God does. We don't really own our possessions, resources, or money - God does. That realization demands a level of detachment from yourself.

Getting detached from yourself is a lifelong process. The Lord is faithful to help us go deeper into what that means as we move towards being more like Jesus. George Muller, an Englishman who lived in the 1800s, was an exceptional man of God – one of the great all time followers of Jesus. I appreciate the following statement. "There was a day when I died, utterly died to George Muller and his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world – its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame of even my brethren and friends and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God." I believe Muller was talking about getting detached from yourself. You might say, "Rick, that's impossible!" No, it isn't. It's not natural, I'll give you that. It's supernatural. You can't get there on your own, but the Holy Spirit can most certainly produce it in your life. Jesus, as always, is our example. He got detached from Himself. Didn't He give up His preferences and His rights when He agreed to be born in a stable and experience all the limitations of being human? How about when He

endured the slapping, the mocking, the scourging, and the nails of the cross? Jesus died for you because He first died to Himself. Getting detached from yourself.

Some of you will remember Tom Skinner who passed away back in 1994. Early in his life, Tom was the leader of the largest, toughest gang in New York City – the Harlem Lords. He became a follower of Jesus, left the gang the next day, and eventually became a nationwide evangelist greatly used by God. Just a few weeks after his conversion, however, he was playing a football game. His assignment on one play was to block the defensive end on the other team. He did such an effective job blocking that his own halfback scored a touchdown. When he got up from the ground to head back to the huddle, the boy he'd just blocked – who happened to be white – jumped in front of him in a rage and punched him in the stomach without warning. Then he hit Tom across the back. This young man then kicked Tom and obscenely cursed him. Tom Skinner said that under normal circumstances he would have pulverized that white kid. But, instead, he got up from the ground, looked the other young man in the face and said, “You know, because of Jesus Christ, I love you anyway.” Even though he was just a new Christian, Tom knew he could no longer operate on the same old level of tit for tat, hate for hate, and retaliation. After the game, the boy who had attacked Tom came over to him and said, “Tom, you've done more to knock prejudice out of me by telling me that you loved me than you would have if you'd socked my jaw in.” The Sermon on the Mount isn't impossible to live out. Impossible, yes, if Jesus doesn't live in you, but very possible indeed if Jesus lives in you. Now, if you and are going to treat people as made in God's image, something else is necessary.

GET GOD'S LOVE INTO YOU.

The hardest part of Jesus' message might this business in v. 43-48 about loving your enemies. Jesus correctly quoted a familiar teaching of the day, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But only the first half of that saying was found in the Bible. For example, we read, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Lev 19:18 NLT) But nowhere did God ever say in the Old Testament, “... and hate your enemy.” The religious leaders had added that thought. Apparently, they'd concluded that God couldn't possibly have meant that we should love everyone – especially even our enemies. By correcting these religious leaders, Jesus restored His Father's original teaching.

Many of us are aware that the Greek language - in which the New Testament was written - had several different words for “love.” The word for God's kind of love is “agape.” It's the kind of love with which God loves us. It's divine in source and origin. Once God starts to live within you through the Holy Spirit, you become capable of this same kind of love. For instance, agape love doesn't depend on the “likeability” of the person loved. We're moral failures before a holy God. God loves us despite our lack of moral likeability. Agape has the ability to seek the very best – the highest good – for someone else even when your natural feelings are negative toward that person. God loves like that all of the time. Jesus reminds us here that His Father makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the crops of sinful farmers just as much as on the crops of

godly farmers. God's love is unselfish, compassionate, and full of mercy. Of course, the ultimate expression of God's love is what Jesus did for us. The Bible says, "Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom 5:7-8 NLT)

Then again, agape love is more an act of the will than an emotion. It's something you do more than something you feel. When you see the word "agape" – or its translation – in the New Testament, it's associated with some kind of an action. As an example, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (Jo 3:16 NLT) Even when the actual word "agape" isn't even used, you see the action involved. As Jesus was being crucified, He said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Lk 23:34 NLT) When Stephen – the first follower of Jesus to die for his faith – was being stoned, he said, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" (Acts 7:60 NLT) You hear it in the words of the great Christian leader, Paul, when he talks about his ministry, "We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. We appeal gently when evil things are said about us." (1 Cor 4:12-13 NLT)

When God's kind of love – apape - gets into you, you find ways to positively and constructively benefit and bless even those who are treating you wrongly. I like how C.S. Lewis explained it, "The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him." In other words, when it comes to treating people as those made in God's image the old truth is still true. Act your way into a new way of feeling instead of feeling your way into a new way of acting. I suspect that everyone in this room has been mistreated by someone else at some time in our lives. I know I have. I also know how easy it is to give into resentment and let bitterness both poison and control our lives. You might see that person coming toward you and your stomach starts to churn. Or you fantasize how you might strike back and teach that person a lesson. But when you start to follow Jesus, you start to get detached from yourself. As that's happening, God's love is getting into you. Can that kind of transformation really happen in your life and mine? Yes, it can and it must if you're truly Jesus' disciple.

During the Korean War back in the 1950s, a South Korean civilian was arrested by the Communists and ordered to be shot. But when the young Communist officer learned that his prisoner was a Christian and that he was in charge of an orphanage of small children, he decided to do something despicable. He spared the man but killed his son instead. He shot his 19 year old son right in front of that Christian man. Later, the fortunes of war changed and that same Communist leader was captured by United Nations forces, tried, and condemned to death. But before his sentence was carried out, the same follower of Jesus whose son had been killed by that man came and pleaded for the life of the killer. He said to the court, "Give him to me and I'll train him." His request was granted and this man took the murderer of his own son into his own home and cared for him. Eventually, that young man – once a Communist and a

murderer – went on to serve Jesus as a pastor in South Korea. Could you do something like that? I remind you of that quote from G.K. Chesterton, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

Jesus says something very searching at the end of the passage we are considering today. “But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Mt 5:48 NLT) God doesn’t grade your personal goodness on a curve. You don’t get to balance your good deeds against your bad deeds and then hope you have more good than bad so you can somehow just squeeze into Heaven. God’s standard has always been perfection because He’s an absolutely holy God. All of us have fallen miserably short of that standard. It would be easy for me to read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and get all discouraged, “I can’t do that. I can’t be that way. I’m not perfect and I’ll never be good enough.” But I learned years ago that’s the very reason God sent Jesus. Only Jesus is perfect. And when you put your trust in Him for this life and eternity, His perfection completely covers your imperfection. On that basis, God accepts you into His forever family. And, then, as you continue to follow Jesus, grow in Jesus, mature in Jesus, you gradually take on His character, His attitudes, and His pattern of behavior. You experience transformation. That’s being His disciple. That’s discipleship. And part and parcel of discipleship is getting detached from yourself and getting God’s love into you.

Back in April of 2000, Ricky Sexton and his wife, Toni, were taken hostage inside their Wytheville, Virginia home by another couple who were on a crime spree. Toni had just taken her poodle outside when Dennis Lewis and Angela Tanner roared up into her driveway in their car, pointed pistols at her, and yelled at her to get back inside her house. Lewis and Tanner followed her inside at gunpoint. Inside the home, the Sextons managed to turn their hostage experience into an opportunity to demonstrate God’s love. They listened to their captors’ troubles, fed them, showed them Gospel videos, read to them from the Bible, and prayed with them. Eventually negotiations with the police began and Ricky Sexton actually refused his own release when Lewis and Tanner suggested that they might end the standoff by committing suicide. The whole event had an unusual ending. Before surrendering to the police, Angela Tanner left \$135 in cash and a note for the Sextons that read, “Thank you for the hospitality. We really appreciate it. Please accept this. It really is all we have to offer. Wish all luck and love. Love, Angela and Dennis.”

You never know when an opportunity to show the love of Jesus will be given to you. Toni Sexton just took her dog outside and her whole world turned upside down in a moment of time! She wasn’t thinking then about being a witness for Jesus, but when the opportunity came up, she and her husband, Ricky, did just that. I can’t promise you that there will always be a great ending to stories like that one, but I can promise you that God will provide us many opportunities to show the world what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Part and parcel of that will mean getting detached from yourself and getting God’s love into you. And when that happens, there will be one inevitable outcome. You will treat anyone and everyone as made in God’s image.