

February 23, 2020
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles? Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

"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, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Background:

Today's gospel follows on the text from last week in Matthew's Gospel. The text continues in the same style of instruction of his disciples, where he first quotes a familiar instruction from the Torah, and then he adds his own teaching. As stated previously, this text and that of last week is part of the much larger instruction commonly known the Sermon on the Mount, which began with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3).

This group of teachings began with Jesus' statement: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) It seems that Jesus is responding to those who questioned his faithfulness to their traditions. His response here, and in last week's text, is that he is not contradicting or turning from the tradition that has been handed down. Rather, he is teaching a deepening of the attitude that lies beneath their tradition.

The familiar injunction "an eye for eye" that Jesus quotes in verse 38 of today's gospel comes from Leviticus 24:19. The original teaching was meant to limit the revenge one could inflict on another when wronged. In honor-based culture, one was expected to defend one's honor when wronged, especially when others were aware of the challenge. Not to respond was to bring shame on oneself and one's family. The establishment of some norm for retaliation functioned to limit the retaliation one could rightfully enact when wronged. Jesus' teaching here goes even further than limiting acts of revenge. He asks his disciples to give up any right to retaliation and endure the shame that this will bring upon them. To appreciate how radical Jesus' teaching is, it would be helpful to understand the culture of Jesus' time, and to know what those who were hearing Jesus' teaching took for granted as part of their everyday experience.

The Jews of the day lived under Roman rule. To go to court with a countryman was an embarrassment. Jesus makes his point even more dramatic by using a person's coat and tunic for the matter to be disputed. A person's coat was not only an essential piece of clothing, but it also served as a blanket or sleeping bag at night. If a person offered a coat when they had nothing else to offer as collateral in a promise, that coat had to be returned before nightfall so that he who offered it had something to keep him warm at night. When Jesus suggests that if a person has the audacity to ask for a person's tunic, that they should give him their coat as well, he implies they would be left standing before them naked, without protection and under the weight of cultural norms that said that you did not behave toward another in this manner.

The third example Jesus uses in his teaching against retaliation is that of a soldier who could demand that a citizen carry his armor for a mile. The typical soldier was a fellow Israelite who had sold his services to Rome as a mercenary. He could ask a civilian of the day to carry his heavy pack of armor for one mile, but no more. To carry the armor of a fellow Jew who was now serving Rome was humiliating. Everyone knew that—the

mercenary, the person forced into service, and all those who witnessed it. But to then volunteer to carry the pack of armor a second mile throws the system of power and shame out of balance. The soldier loses his ability to bully another, and receives a freely given act of service by a fellow countryman who is treating him with respect and not as a hated mercenary.

Reflection Questions:

1. Where in the scriptures is God portrayed as one who seek retaliation?
2. What are some of the reasons people would want to think of God as one who seeks retaliation?
3. How prevalent in our society is the desire to retaliate? Can you think of examples of retaliation in our culture, in your community, in your family, or within you?
4. What happens within you when you encounter anger, jealousy, disrespect, and prejudice? What happens within you when you respond to others in like manner?
5. Have you ever participated in a refusal to seek retaliation? How did that affect you and/or the situation?
6. Can you think of a time when Jesus refused to seek retaliation? How did that affect the situation? How did that affect others' attitude toward him?
7. Why would Jesus want to portray God as one who refused to seek retaliation?
8. Can you talk with God about your image of God, a God retaliation, a God who rejects retaliation, or whatever arose within you from this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material is posted on Fridays and is available until the following Friday when new material is posted. Excerpts from the Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. Used with permission. All rights reserved. No portion of this text may be reproduced by any means without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

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Excerpts from the readings for February 23, 2020, the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:

Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

"You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.

Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him.

Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

The Lord is kind and merciful.

Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name; forget not all his benefits.

He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills.

He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion.

Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.

If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written:

God catches the wise in their own ruses, and again: The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you,

Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future:

all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.

When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well.

If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well.

Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles.

Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

"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,

that you may be children of your heavenly Father,

for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

If you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?

So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Excerpts from Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10-13; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48