

Raising the Bar

Matthew 5:38-48

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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This passage for today comes from what we call Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Imagine that you are there the day that Jesus preaches this sermon. By the time that Jesus gets to the passage we have just read, he's been preaching for about 5½ minutes. (I read it out loud the other day and timed it.)

Here's how Jesus has used that first 5½ minutes of the sermon. He opens the sermon in a gentle way—with blessings. Blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the merciful...things like that. Then Jesus looks at his congregation to whom he is preaching this sermon and says to them, "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world." I'm sure they must have felt pretty good to hear Jesus say that about them.

Then Jesus turns to what it looks like to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He starts talking about the Old Testament law, something that every one of them was familiar with. And Jesus says in so many words that those who are the light of the world cannot act just like everyone else acts. He says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven."

The righteousness of the Pharisees was well known. The Pharisees were the super-righteous. They were the ones who were experts in the Old Testament law, and they took great pride in their ability to keep the law, took pride in their righteousness. And here comes Jesus saying that his hearers—these people he has just called the salt of the earth and the light of the world—are to be more righteous than the Pharisees. Suddenly now this sermon has taken a turn. Here Jesus is raising the bar

Jesus then gives some specifics: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not kill.'" And certainly many people in the congregation nodded—"Yes, I've heard that, and No, I've never done that; I've kept the law; I'm not guilty of that one." But Jesus didn't stop there: "But I say to you everyone who is angry with another person is liable to judgment." It's one thing to say that I'm not guilty of murder; but can I say that I am not guilty of even being angry with my brother or sister? Jesus has definitely raised the bar here.

Then comes another example. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said that you shall not commit adultery." Again many people in the congregation patted themselves on the back: Not guilty of that one. However, Jesus didn't stop there: "But I say to you anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Once again, Jesus raises the bar.

Those who are the light of the world cannot act just like everyone else out there. They are to practice a higher righteousness.

After a couple of other examples, Jesus gets to the passage we read a few minutes ago: "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" Here Jesus quoting the passage from Exodus 21 that says, "If any harm comes to you, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:23-25).

Now actually when that concept was added to the law, it was itself a way to raise the bar of behavior. Because up to that point, it was felt that the way to react when some harm has been

done to you is to retaliate with greater violence. If someone puts out your eye, you respond by killing that person and his whole family. You certainly would not retaliate in kind. So this idea of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and a life for a life” was actually a giant step forward. If someone poked out your eye, you could retaliate but only to the point of poking out his eye.

That’s certainly a step forward. However, that is not where Jesus stops. He raises the bar even higher: “But I say to you do not resist one who is evil. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Turn the other cheek. Do not retaliate at all.

I heard an interesting thought about this verse where Jesus says, “If someone slaps you on the right cheek...” In a world where most people are right handed, if someone is going to slap you on the right cheek, it would mean that they would probably be slapping you with the back of the hand. Which is to say that it is not only a violent act, but also an insulting, demeaning act. How does someone who is the light of the world react when someone assaults them, insults them, demeans them? He...she...turns the other cheek.

Jesus still isn’t finished. He goes on to say, “You have heard that it was said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” Now here it must be said that the Old Testament law never actually says that—hate your enemy. But there are plenty of places where it is clearly suggested that if you love God, you will hate the godless. (Look at Psalms 58 and 109, for example.)

By Jesus’ day the accepted way of doing things was that you were supposed to love your neighbor but hate your enemy. And as Jesus has done over and over again, here too he raises the bar: “But I say to you love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.”

By the time Jesus gets to this point in his sermon, he has raised the moral bar considerably. You who are the light of the world cannot act like everyone else acts. He says that if we show love only for those who love us, then we’re really no different from the tax collectors; they do that much. No, followers of Jesus are called to be different, to act according to a higher standard.

Let me give a couple of illustrations of people who for me are examples of what it means to take this word of Jesus seriously, people who have tried to live according to a higher standard of righteousness.

The first example comes from the turbulent decade of 1960s, and it takes place right here in our own church. In that period of our national life when racial tensions were high, there were some white churches—particularly in the south—that made it clear that no black people were welcome to worship there. Some churches even designated a group of men that they called, euphemistically, The Color Guard. They were to stand guard at the door to make sure that no one of the wrong color was allowed in.

During that challenging time, the Session of our church had a discussion about what we would do if a black person showed up at our door to come to worship. I imagine that there were probably some who were ready to shut and lock the doors if that were to happen. But Elder Ned Dorton had a different idea, and he made a motion. He moved that, “All persons who present themselves for worship at Philadelphia Presbyterian Church will be seated without incident.” He argued that it would be wrong for us to communicate to the missionaries that we were supporting at that time, who were serving in Zaire, that their home church refused to welcome the very people to whom they were taking the gospel of Jesus Christ. The motion passed unanimously, and it’s still a part of our church record today (Kerr, *Presbyterian Gathering at Clear Creek*, p. 318).

The second example I want to give comes from more recent times. After the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, our first reaction was to strike back. They attacked us; we needed to hit back. And we did. Now we have been engaged in a war in Afghanistan for 10 years, and it appears that we'll be there for years to come. In contrast to the strike-back-with-violence option, Greg Mortensen has taken a different approach with the people of Afghanistan. He's raising money to build schools there. He tells his story in his book *Three Cups of Tea*, and the schools he is building are making a difference. Rather than dropping more and more bombs and shooting more and more bullets, which only serves to continue the violence, these schools are giving people hope for a new and better life. And I think that approach more faithfully follows what Jesus calls his disciples to do.

I'm not saying any of this is easy or the popular thing to do; I'm just saying that Jesus calls his people to live by a higher righteousness. And in this sermon, he's not finished yet.

As Jesus continues his sermon, and continues to raise the bar, he finally says, "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect."

And with that, he appears to have put the bar out of reach—or so it seems. This word "perfect" does not refer to moral perfection. If that's what it means, then we may as well give up, because we'll never get there. No, the word really means "complete," "whole."

Jesus has just described how God sends rain to fall and sun to shine on the just and on the unjust. God does not play favorites; God is not selective in who is to receive God's blessings.

Think about it this way. After all this dry weather we've had and the threat of drought, imagine God sending a sweet, gentle, life-giving, nourishing rain. God sends the rain to fall on all people—on the good and the evil, on the just and the unjust. Imagine that rain falling down. It falls on the guy who has just robbed the 7-11 and is running down the street. The rain falls on the lady who has just taken a chicken casserole her next door neighbor who is sick. The rain falls on the businessman scurrying to his car who has just negotiated a crooked business deal. The rain falls on the homeless man who has just shared his sandwich with one of his homeless neighbors. The rain falls on the just and on the unjust. God does not play favorites when it comes to giving God's blessings. God is indiscriminate, pouring out blessings on those who deserve them and those who do not deserve them.

Maybe that's what it means to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect—to be as generous and indiscriminate in showing love for others as God has been in showing love for us.

I'm not saying any of this is easy. I'm just saying that's what Jesus calls us to do. After all, you are the light of the world. Let your light so shine that people will see your good works and give glory to the Father who is in heaven. Amen. ✠