

EPIPHANY 7, YEAR A

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Someone mentioned last week that there were some real zingers. That is part of the genius of the Gospels, I think. Jesus invites us in at times with gentle words of a new, albeit countercultural, life. “Blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers.” Whether we identify with one of the beatitudes or not, they seem a nice enough sentiment that we might as well stick around to hear a little more of what he says.

Then he starts getting a little more specific, moving from the generalized groups of those who hunger and thirst to the more direct “you.” You are the salt, you are the light. The commentary on the overturning of the status quo moves from a passive to active state. He sets a new and higher standard, calling into question the traditions of men by setting them alongside the wisdom of God.

In this light, he exposes the faulty underpinnings of our lives. But even then, he is not satisfied with merely revealing them to us. No, he sets his gaze squarely upon them, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.” He does not swing randomly, flailing about to make a show out of his point. Rather, he wields his words with the skill of a surgeon. And like a surgeon who seeks to cut out the cancerous growth that has infected the lives of mankind, he cuts us deep, but he cuts because he loves.

His words should zing us. His words should pierce us to the depths of our souls, because that is exactly how far he has to go in order to save us. Sometimes, he comes like a trickle of water through a crack in an old foundation, slowly eating away at the empty promises and trust on which so many lives are built. And sometimes, he comes in like a wrecking ball, smashing to pieces the ways of this world so that he may be the foundation of the new life to come. And today, he continues his precision demolition with words that should take us out at the knees.

“Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you” (Matt. 5:39-42)

A strike on the cheek was a blow to one’s personal honor. Turning the other cheek, offering it in reply to the first insult, shows no regard for that personal honor and rejects the value of others’ opinions. The cloak was an important garment in Jesus day, often doubling as bedding for the poor or those who were travelling. It was even protected by the law so that no one could take it. Likewise, the occupying army of Rome had the right to impose labor on its new “subjects”, forcing them for example to bear a load for them a mile down the road. Having given our honor, belongings, time, and labor to those who forcefully demand them of us, Jesus now says that we should give them away freely to those who are in need.

It seems that in the course of a few verses, Jesus has asked us to wander the streets naked and penniless, insulted and oppressed. And while that is not outside the realm of possibility, Jesus is, I believe, overstating his point for effect, forcing us to stop and think on just what it is that value. “Our

‘vested interests’ must be in heaven, not on earth. If we cannot value the kingdom that much, Jesus says, it will not belong to us.”¹

That is how Jesus may demand love and prayer for our enemies and persecutors. It is not when love is easy or freely returned to us that we display the virtues of God. Everyone does that. It is when it is hard that the fullness of love is shown through us.

Jesus’ words strike at the very core of human selfishness, summoning us to value others above ourselves in concrete and consistent ways...we should be so unselfish and trust God so much that we leave our vindication with him. We have no honor or property worth defending compared with the opportunity to show how much we love God and everyone else. By not retaliating, by not coming down to the [enemies’ or the insulters’ or the] oppressors’ level, we necessarily will appear unrealistic to the world. Jesus’ way scorns the world’s honor and appears realistic only to those with the eyes of faith. It is the lifestyle of those who anticipate his coming kingdom (4:17).²

It is the lifestyle of those who have been called to perfection.

There is a saying which is a close relative of its more popular cousin, “Perfection is in the eye of the beholder.” While I won’t try to parse what most people mean by that, I will say this, it is exactly the right sentiment for our relationship with God. Jesus has called us to perfection after the likeness of our heavenly Father. And when God looks at us, he desires to see that perfection which we once had before the Fall, before the disease of sin had taken root in our lives. It is a goal which is unattainable by us, a seemingly cruel standard set by a cruel and unloving God.

But if you follow the course of the Sermon on the Mount, if you follow the course of the Gospel from beginning to end, you see that Jesus is tearing down the walls which separate us from God. Jesus is cutting through the barrier which sin creates between him and us and one another. Like a wrecking ball breaking down everything in his way to us, even death itself. He knows that unless the cancer is gone, healing cannot begin. Unless the foundation is sure, the structure will fall. He cuts our legs out from under us so that we won’t try to stand on our own.

Jesus does it all, so that when he reaches us he can offer us that which we cannot attain by ourselves, his own perfection. He freely clothes us with his righteousness so that as we stand before our heavenly Father, before his loving but just gaze which demands nothing less than perfection to be in his presence, he will see a foundation laid which is Jesus Christ. He will see a temple where the Holy Spirit dwells.

Jesus is the only foundation on which we may hope, the only one on which we may build. We do not build to add to the perfection we receive. We build to reveal the perfection which undergirds our meager efforts. We stand not on our own but on the rock of Christ so that we may respond to insults, and enemies, and oppressors, and the poor, and strangers with the love that we have already received, a love so extravagant the God sent his only Son to die for it.

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect; for you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

¹ Craig Keener, *Matthew (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series)*, p. 132.

² Keener, 127.