

“Turning the Other Cheek, and Other Lessons I’ve Ignored”

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27“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

37“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”
(Luke 6:27-38)

Let’s start with a little audience participation. Raise your hand if you are playing the online game “Wordle.” Ever since a pastor friend put me on to the game a few weeks ago, I have been playing regularly. It blew up almost overnight. If you don’t know Wordle, the object of the game is to guess a five letter word by trial and error. If you guess a correct letter in the right spot, it shows up green. If you have correct letters but in the wrong spot, those squares are yellow. Through the process of elimination, you have six guesses to get to the magic word.

A few weeks ago, I failed to get the correct answer in six guesses. That would not be so odd, except that on this particular day I had a better than average chance, because my first two guesses put me in amazingly good shape. After just two guesses, I had four green squares. Whatever the magic word was, I knew that it ended with “I-G-H-T.” All I had to do was figure out that first letter, and I had four guesses. I sat back a bit in my chair and thought, “Oh, I’ve got this. There’s no way I don’t get this.”

In hindsight, that was my first step down the wrong path.

I looked at the letters that had not yet been eliminated. F was one of them, so my next guess was “FIGHT.” Nope, that wasn’t it. I wasted no time on the next guess – the next letter that came to mind – “m” for “MIGHT.” That wasn’t it either. OK, then it has to be “R.” But, ironically enough, that was not “right” either. My hubris had turned quickly to mild panic. I had just one shot left. I staring down the barrel of my first Wordle fail ever. Still, I thought the last guess was solid one, so I went for it: “N-I-G-H-T.” I pressed enter and my heart sank. Wrong. Fail. You Lose. And the word that I had NOT guessed, but should have guessed, was staring back at me like a condemnation. The word I had NOT guessed, but should have guessed, was “LIGHT.”



And the thought came to me immediately -- how ironic, how tragic even, that a preacher had not thought of that. In the beginning, God said "Let there be LIGHT," and there was LIGHT. Jesus said, "I am the LIGHT of the world." The "LIGHT" shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. I use that word a lot in my line of work, but it had not come to mind. And to add insult to injury, just look what had come to mind: MIGHT... RIGHT... FIGHT... NIGHT.

And then I had another thought.

Maybe it's just me... but I don't think it's just me... isn't it easier for us to go to those darker places first? Is that our typical reflex? When the pressure is on, when we are being confronted or challenged, what are we more likely to see -- the NIGHT, or the LIGHT? When our backs are against the wall, is it easier for us to embrace the concept of MIGHT makes RIGHT? When we are frightened or hurt, does our initial instinct prompt us to FIGHT? Why isn't the LIGHT our first choice more often?

That Wordle failure came flooding back to me as I began to study this passage from Luke. In Matthew's gospel, this teaching of Jesus is part of what we know as the "Sermon on the Mount." Luke calls it the "Sermon on the Plain." Either way, whether it was uttered on hilly terrain or on a flat grassy meadow, these lessons are some of the most difficult in all of scripture. They are difficult because they go against so much of what we are taught, so much of what we consider to be "common sense." If someone hits you, you hit them back. If someone hates you, you hate them back. If someone wrongs you, go out and get yourself some revenge. It is basic playground justice, and we learn it at a young age. Stand up and fight back, Stick up for yourself or people will roll over you.

Would you not agree that those strategies come more easily and naturally than what Jesus calls his disciples to do? The world tells us to take an eye for an eye, to counter-punch a punch, to even the score when someone hurts us. But Jesus doubles down on love as the only strategy for living, even to the point of saying "*If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other one so they can hit that one too. If someone asks you for something, always give it to them. If they steal something from you, don't worry about it. Love your enemies... bless those who curse you... pray for people who abuse you. Always lead with love, no matter what.*"

And maybe it's just me... but I don't think it's just me... it seems a lot easier to choose **might**, to defend my **rights**, to stand up and **fight** day and **night**. We say we choose Jesus, we say we want to follow Jesus, but how often, when push comes to shove, do we really choose **light**?

There is a longstanding debate within the church that focuses on the Sermon on the Mount, or the Sermon on the Plain, whatever language we use to reference these very difficult lessons of Jesus. No one disputes that the ethical bar of these rules is extremely high. That is not the question. The question that gets debated is whether God really expects us to do these things. What Jesus is teaching sounds a lot like perfection, and as human beings we will never be perfect, at least not on this side of heaven. So, some argue that, even as Jesus preached these things, Jesus knew that we could never live up to these standards. They suggest that Jesus taught these things not to show us what to do, but rather to prove to us of what we will **never be able** to do. These laws are important because they push us into the arms of God's grace, because we will never be holy enough, righteous enough, or perfect enough to make it over the wall unless God is there to pull us over.

Let me explain it this way. In my first semester of law school, our criminal law professor took great pains to teach us that there is a difference between thinking about doing something bad and actually doing that bad thing. An act may be criminal, but if a person does not really intend to do the harm, then it is not technically a crime. The Latin legal term is *mens rea*, or “guilty mind.” So, one person may kill another person, but if it was an accident, or if he didn’t really mean to do it, if he didn’t have a guilty mind about it, then it might be bad or unfortunate, but what happened was not “murder.”

What Jesus did was to flip that whole concept on its ear. Before the Sermon on the Plain, before a person was labeled a criminal, they had to both do an act AND have a guilty mind. You could think about a bad act and not do it. You could do a bad act and not really mean it. If you didn’t do both, you were clean in the eyes of the law. After the Sermon on the Plain, it didn’t matter if you actually did the thing or not. In order to be guilty, all you had to do is think about it. After that, in the eyes of heaven a “guilty mind” is all it took.

And maybe it’s just me... but I don’t think it’s just me... if God really expects that level of righteousness from us – the kind of righteousness where it’s not even OK to think about hitting someone back... the kind of righteousness that doesn’t even duck to avoid a second punch... if that’s the wall that we have to cross to get into heaven, then I’m worried that I may never get there. That kind of purity and goodness seems superhuman to me... or, to use the words of the psalmist, it is “*so high that I cannot attain it.*”¹ So, you see, this question is no small thing. Does God really expect us to act this way? Are these actual rules? Or are they more like symbols, signposts, lessons meant to direct our attention to the kind of holiness we can expect and admire in God, but never realistically expect from ourselves?

I’ve thought about this question a lot over the years, and all of my pondering has really only led me to two things I can say with some confidence. The first is that the height, length, width, and depth of God’s grace are shockingly immense. God’s capacity to love, to forgive, to seek us out, and to save us from ourselves is greater than we can imagine, so great, in fact, that there is “*nothing in all of creation*” that can separate us from God’s love. So, even as we struggle to forgive those who have wronged us, to love those who have been cruel to us, to show restraint and mercy to those who would never show restraint or mercy to us – even as we fail to get over this high wall again and again... God will keep on claiming us and loving us, simply because that is who God is. That good news is the first thing.

The second thing is tougher. As much as I want to say, “Don’t worry about it...” as much as I may want to believe that Jesus does not expect us to actually accomplish these holy assignments... I cannot say that. First of all, it just seems too easy. More importantly, though, if we were to say that these laws of love are not actual rules, if we claim that they do not really apply to us, then aren’t we basically saying that what we do, how we act, does not matter? Can we really say that the way we choose to live as children of God does not matter? No, we cannot say that. How we live does matter. How we choose to love others and treat others and forgive others does matter.

But the biggest reason that we cannot dismiss these rules is that Jesus himself lived up to them. Not in theory, not metaphorically, but literally, in the flesh, he did them all. When his face got hit repeatedly, he turned his other cheek for additional blows. When the people turned on him and became his enemies, he never stopped loving them, even the ones who lied about him, even the ones who accused him of things he had not done, even

¹ Psalm 139:6.

the ones who nailed him to a cross. Right up to the moment of his painful death, he was still praying for them, all of them, saying “*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*”² How can we, in good conscience, deign to give ourselves a free pass, or dare to suggest that these holy rules do not say what they mean and mean what they say?

Many of you are old enough to remember the Aaron Sorkin drama “The West Wing.” I loved that show, and one of the episodes that I remember best was called “Take this Sabbath Day.” The plot revolves around a man on death row. There were all kinds of problems with his conviction, mostly technical stuff, but the Supreme Court had refused to stay the execution. The one and only remaining chance for the defense was to appeal to the White House for a last minute stay. It is Sunday night, and the execution is scheduled to take place exactly one minute after midnight. Time is running out, and the President, Jed Bartlett, is struggling mightily with himself. Personally, he is an opponent of the death penalty, both on ethical grounds and spiritual grounds. As a politician, however, he feels the tremendous weight of public opinion, the vast majority of Americans who feel that justice has been done, and that this criminal should receive the capital punishment assigned by the courts.

In the final scene, the President’s parish priest, Father Cavanaugh, comes for a private audience in the Oval Office. In the midst of his crisis of faith, it was the only place President Bartlett had to turn. After some pleasantries, the priest asks for clarification on an important detail. “I don’t know how to address you,” he says. “Would you prefer Jed or Mr. President?”

“To be honest, I’d prefer Mr. President. There are certain decisions I have to make while I am in this room... do I send troops into harm’s way... which fatal disease gets the most research money. It’s helpful in those situations not to think of yourself as the man, but as the office.”

“Then Mr. President it is.”

Bartlett then begins to explain how his staff had looked for a reason to stop the execution, to find some political cover for that decision – a technicality, or evidence of racism.

“So your staff spent the weekend looking for a way out,” the priest asked, “like the kid in right field who doesn’t want the ball to get hit to him?”

“I looked for a way out,” the President said. “I really did.”

And while the priest clearly had compassion for Jed Bartlett the person, there was no real escape from the fact that Jed Bartlett the President was making a choice. The President has the power to save that prisoner’s life, and the man could make that happen. Even in that moment, he could make that happen. That was all that really needed to be said. Everything else was just rationalization – the same kind of rationalization that we all do when we tell ourselves that Jesus can’t really want us to love that enemy, or turn our other cheek to that person’s fist.

At that moment, the president looks down at his wristwatch. The hour and minute hands are already pointing directly to 12, and we watch the last few clicks as the second hand turns to join them. It is the stroke of midnight, literally the last minute. But the President lets the minute pass.

² Luke 23:34.

Soon, an aide knocks softly and brings a small handwritten note to the President. The deed is done. The prisoner's life is over.

"Jed," the priest says, "would you like me to hear your confession?"

The answer is yes. The priest dons his purple stole, and Jed Bartlett, the human being, kneels in the Oval Office, and the scene fades to black with the final words, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."³

I know it's just a show, but that's really all that we can do when we know these teachings of Jesus and we choose to ignore them. Confession of guilt really is the only thing we can do when we try to tell ourselves that these sacred codes of conduct do not really apply to us... that God does not really expect these things of us... that we have good reasons not to act like Jesus acted, not to love like Jesus loved.

Forgive us Lord, for those times when we know how you would act in love, but we refuse to follow. Give us the courage, the will, and the strength to choose the light.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

³ Aaron Sorkin, "Take this Sabbath Day," *The West Wing*. https://subslikescript.com/series/The_West_Wing-200276/season-1/episode-14-Take_This_Sabbath_Day.