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There are a couple of things you should know about this passage: in the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus speaks, he means what he says. I say that because many people have tried to “spin” this passage in a way that makes it easier and less demanding. That’s simply not accurate. Here Jesus means what he says. If you do not like what it says, that is understandable, but you cannot explain it away. As well, this passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount – a radical series of teachings from Jesus about the kingdom of God and what a true disciple looks like – and it comes at the beginning of his ministry. This sermon represents what God is like, what God’s rule will look like and in challenging detail, describes what a disciple should be like in this kingdom – again by describing who God is and what God looks like. Discuss vs.38 (Lex Talonis); vs 43 (true); vs 45 (also true).

***Matthew 5:38-48***

*38 ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” 39But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. 43 ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? 47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

***Love***

I had wanted today’s sermon to be about peace and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – because I believe our world, our communities are desperately in need of peace and I want to honor Dr. King – and this passage certainly lends itself to the theme of peace and the life Dr. King lived. I tried and tried to write a sermon about peace. However, as I tried to make it be about peace, God wouldn’t let me. God frustrated ever effort I made to preach this passage about peace. And after hours of frustration Friday morning, I wanted to give up. But then God helped me to see that this passage, while involving peace, is actually about Love – about unconditional love lived out. As part of Jesus Sermon on the Mount this passage continues a set of teachings describing what a true disciple looks like – and ultimately that disciple looks like Love, unconditional love.

This passage describes the true disciple who is a disciple of Christ because he or she, as they get to that place of being Christ like, loves everyone the way God loves. The description of behaviors and actions in this passage are exactly how God acts and would act here on earth. After all, Jesus did these things, right? Remember after he was arrested? He was whipped and beaten and tortured – and never said a thing. Remember he was hung on a cross and painfully murdered – and not only did he not strike back or seek revenge, but he forgave those who did this to him. Jesus lived out this passage as he lived out a life of love. And here is the key for us today as we go about our business of growing as disciples: I believe Jesus was able to live out a life of God’s love because he was deeply connected to the Living Holy Spirit of God Almighty. He was able to live out this difficult and challenging life of unconditional love because he was intimately connected to God. God’s Spirit filled him deeply throughout his total being; and Jesus lived out of that place.

As we begin the journey I described last week – the journey to grow as disciples of Christ – which means: knowing what Jesus knew so we can do what Jesus did so we can be Jesus in the world – I believe the place to start that journey is by building that connection to God and Jesus. I believe the starting point, the foundation for this journey to being a disciple of Jesus is to really commit to focusing on growing that connection to God in Christ. To me that is the first step. Because without that connection, we look at this passage and think: “This passage is impossible. No one can do what he is asking. Be perfect – that’s crazy. Can’t be done.”

And you know what? Without that connection to God, these behaviors will be impossible. Without a continual, deep connection to God we won't be able to be true disciples – living out Jesus’ unconditional love. I don't believe we can ever “will” ourselves to live like this – but many of us try every day to do just that. But, with that connection, I believe everything Jesus is asking of us as disciples in this passage, and in all of the Sermon on the Mount, is doable.

All of it.

Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile for your enemies, giving without reservation, praying for our enemies, loving our enemies. All doable. But only doable through the Spirit of God at work in us. I believe our behaviors, our reactions, our words all come from our hearts – so that is where we need to make sure we are connected to God.

Let me explain that idea by using a devotional Pat Rowe shared with us earlier this week:

*The teacher took me around the back of the common hall where there was a blank canvass on a wooden easel and, to its right, a second wooden easel on which rested a beautiful and intricate painting of a landscape.*

*“Your assignment,” he said, “is to copy this painting.”*

*“But I don't know how to paint.”*

*“That’s the challenge,” he replied. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”*

*For the rest of the afternoon I tried my best to reproduce what I saw on the canvas. But for all my efforts, the results looked like something a preschooler would have done. When the teacher returned, there was a long silence as we both stared at my work.*

*“You won't forget this lesson,” he said. “You were trying to reproduce the work of a master. Most of those in the Kingdom do the same.”*

*“Copy paintings?”*

*“Try to reproduce the righteousness of God. They know what’s right and good and holy. They know what a godly life looks like. And they try to live it. The goal is worthy. But the way they go about achieving that goal is wrong. They’re doing what you just did, trying by their own abilities to reproduce the work of the Master. And to do that is to compete with God. And if you* could *do that, you wouldn’t need God. Only God can do the works of God. And a holy life is the work of God.”*

*“Then how can we do it,” I asked, “if God is the only one who can?”*

*“Then that’s the key. God must do it. And you must let him. Imagine if, instead of trying to copy this painting, you were given the artist’s heart and mind, his skills, and his spirit. Then it wouldn’t be a struggle, nor would it be a copy. It would be as if the master was painting through you. Therein lies the key. Don't compete with God trying to copy his works. But learn the secret of letting God work his works in everything you do. If you live with the heart of God, you’ll do the works of God. If you live by the Spirit of God, you will fulfill the will of God. Move in his moving. Love in his loving. Live in his living, and be in his being. As for that painting you did…”*

*“It’s a mess,” I said, “And I think I’ll keep it …as a reminder.”*

*“Live by the Spirit of the master,” said the teacher, “and that which you do will be a masterpiece.”*

Having God’s heart, mind, skills, spirit. That’s the key. Our ability to love our enemies unconditionally, to resist aggression, to be peacemakers, to be disciples and be like Christ come from that place – the place of deep connection and communion with God. I feel as we get more and more connected to God, we will be better citizens, better friends, better spouse; I feel as we grow deeper in our communion with God we won't respond out of anger toward the people around us, we will be more patient with the people we meet and we will stop being such harsh judges; we will love more and fewer and fewer enemies. We will be more forgiving of our co-workers. And as we do that, the kingdom will build slowly but strongly – and we will accomplish what God wants from us.

So how do you get there? It’s like anything else – you put in the effort – you put in the time. You do the right things – in this case you spend time with the Bible. You read it, argue with it, study it, pray with it. As part of our commitment to this, your Discipleship Committee has come up with a plan to have a nighttime Bible study all year long on Thursday nights. Every Thursday night. We are super committed to getting you acquainted with and comfortable engaging the Bible – because that is where you meet God and Jesus and that is where can grow to love him.

Another way you draw close to Jesus and God is through prayer. And I'm not talking about the prayer where you ask God for things – although that is good, important and necessary. I'm talking about the prayer where you sit across from Jesus and have a conversation – you talk to him and listen to him – just like being with any good friend. I am currently making the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius – it is a 30-week program which is all about this kind of prayer – conversational prayer and time spent with Jesus. I am half way through and I now look forward to prayer. I've never really felt that before. I feel so connected to God and I am able to carry that connection all throughout the day. (testimonial of my personal struggles with anger – and how connecting to Jesus has been the only way to keep it in check) After I complete these Exercises I will somehow bring them to you. But in the meantime, adapt your prayer a little – just sit and talk to Jesus, conversationally. Pour out your hearts – tell him the joyful things in your life. Laugh with him. And most of all, listen to him. He wants to talk to you. Don't be afraid to listen quietly for him. You will hear his voice. And you will grow in deep connection to God’s Spirit.

Just start the journey with those two things. Incorporate those into your day. Look at your week and schedule these activities in. And see what happens. Your Spirit will begin to connect with God’s Spirit and you will change – like we talked about last week – your heart will change. Your heart will become like God’s. Then your behaviors, your words, your reactions will all be filled with love and grace and mercy. You won't hurt your friends or your spouse or the people around you. You will bring peace and healing. And hearts around you will be changed by your presence. And that feels good. You will become a child of God like the passage says. And as you connect deeper with God, as you grow closer to God, you will grow as a disciple and all these “impossible” things Jesus talks about here – you’ll do them without even noticing.

You know what sisters and brothers? There is nothing better than being a child of God. There is nothing better than being loved by God and loving like God. The journey to grow as a disciple incorporates all of that. It can be a difficult journey, but it is joy-filed as well. And the world needs more disciples – people of love and peace – the world is incredibly difficult and our country is confused and off-kilter. It needs us to keep it sane and whole and bring healing. So I am encouraging you to take the next few weeks and put in extra effort to look at the Bible more and to talk to God more. Just make the commitment and run with it. Thanks be to God. Amen.