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Matthew 5:38-48   
*How do we forgive?*

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Matthew 5:38-48 The Message (MSG)

“Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously. “You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. “In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

There was a blog last week on Huffington Post that Josh Misner wrote. It was an apology to the ticket agent at the Delta counter. Josh Misner shared about waiting in Chicago on an airplane as the snow fell on the tarmac. On the seat next to him was his teenage daughter and on the other seat was his 6 year-old son. As the plane was delayed, he did not want to show his frustration to his children. His plane did take off and he and his two kids, because of the flight delay, would have two minutes to make their connecting flight. But, that was okay, the flight attendant heard him talking with his children about how they were not going to make their connection. The flight attendant announced over the intercom to the rest of the passengers that everyone was going to need to remain seated until this family exited the plane. The flight attendant used her personal Wi-Fi to locate their connecting gate which was, of course, in a different terminal. Two minutes… it was going to be close, but they might just make it! The flight attendant had given them hope!

The plane landed, and the flight attendant announced one more time that everyone needed to stay seated so this family could make their connecting flight. Josh Misner said that when the “fasten your seatbelts” light came off, it was like a starting pistol for a race. Everyone stood up and ignored the flight attendant’s instructions. Josh said he and his children were the last ones off the plane. They ran as fast as they could to the terminal for the connecting flight. As they made it to the gate, they saw that the jet way door was closed, and the reader board had already been updated with the next flight.

He thought if only everyone on the airplane had not been so selfish. And then, just as his temper was at a boiling point, he spotted a ticket agent in front of the gate. “Excuse me,” he shouted. Nothing. “Hey!” “Can you help us?” Finally the ticket agent responded, “Sorry, but I can’t help you right now,” and he walked away from the gate. Josh proceeded to use language that is not entirely appropriate for me to use as this moment. And then Josh looked down and his 6 year-old son was looking up at him. Josh said his son was not looking at him for answers to their problem, but his son was looking at him because “he had never encountered a situation like this before in his young life, and he needed to find a way to deal with it, should it ever happen again.”

Now his son had a precedent. When presented with future conflicts, or when dealing with difficult solutions and even more difficult people, he could follow his dad’s lead because he had seen how his dad handled it. The family got on another flight and for the next three hours Josh allowed his anger “to lift like a fog that the sun cuts on a cold, clear winter morning.” He thought about lecturing his kids about the dangers of losing your temper with others when it is not even their fault, but he instead chose to do something daring, something that he normally would not have done, something that he said he would never regret. He found the original ticket agent and as he waited in the line of passengers to speak to the ticket agent, he said he could feel his heart begin thumping against his ribs and his palms formed a thin film of sweat.

As Josh and his son came to the desk, the agent looked at them and asked, “Can I help you?” Josh began, “Sir, I don't know if you recognize me, but about three hours ago, I did something inappropriate. I cursed at you because you didn't help us find a new flight after we missed our connection, and that wasn't right. I took my frustration out on you and set a poor example for my children. I want to apologize to you and ask your forgiveness." The ticket agent looked stunned and after a long time he said, “I don't know what to say. I didn't hear you use any foul language, but I do remember you. At the time, I was trying to locate a medical kit for a woman boarding her plane over at the gate next door, and I was in a rush. I wanted to stop to help you, but I was in a hurry to assist the passenger over there. I'm sorry I didn't stop to help."

Josh said, “I was in the wrong, and I need to ask forgiveness to right this wrong, but also to show my son that the way I behaved was not right." The ticket agent said, “It's OK. I forgive you, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your apology. You didn't need to do this. Quite frankly, nobody ever has, and trust me, we get yelled at a lot in this job. You just made my day, and I thank you for that." He then extended his hand for a handshake as he said, "My name is Ron." Josh shook his hand and said, “Thanks, Ron. I'm Josh. Nice to meet you, and I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day." As Josh turned to walk away he looked down at his son, with tears in his eyes, and said, “That, my son, is doing the right thing. Always do the right thing, no matter what."

Josh concluded with these words, “Forgiveness is a gift of love, an act of beauty that benefits not only the person being asked by way of reconciliation, but also the person requesting it, by way of redemption.” The snow, the delayed flight, and the selfishness of others enabled Josh to make things right and for him to model forgiveness for his children. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/josh-misner-phd/to-the-ticket-agent-at-the-delta-counter\_b\_4733642.html)

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”  Jesus is at it again. A list of seemingly impossible attitudes and behaviors. Once again Jesus is intensifying our call to love God and neighbor. Jesus is asking us to embody the demands of the law in concrete and radical, practical and transformative ways.

The eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth thing is to make punishments more proportional to the crime. So, if you steal an apple, let us put an end to cutting off someone’s arm. But Jesus asks, what if we were to turn the other cheek and invite a second slap from our enemies? What if we were to give without questions to all those who ask? What then? No more revenge? No more focusing only on our own self?

The love we tend to share is particular, it is exclusive. We love those who are our neighbors. We love people who look, think and act like us. Those *other* people are our enemies, but what if we were to love the stranger, and pray for those who wish to do us harm?

What if we prayed for those who have different political views than us? What if we prayed for those in Kansas and Arizona who are working to enact legislation that is discriminatory? In our world there are so many places where we are harming and even killing people who are different than us. Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 in the New Revised Standard Version end with this verse, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” but I like how the Message translation puts it, “Grow up. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

In Nigeria if you are even suspected of being gay, you are at risk of being dragged from your home and beaten with sticks and iron bars, like happened to 14 men February 15. The police instead of protecting these men participated in the attack. Friday, the Ugandan President announced that he plans to sign into law a bill making homosexuality a crime worthy of a life sentence. This past Thursday, the Kansas house passed a bill that would make it legal for citizens and government employees to [discriminate against gay people](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/11/kansas-discrimination-bill_n_4762764.html). And we can’t forget the “gay propaganda” law in Russia that makes it illegal for people to come out with their sexuality.

What responsibility do we as Christians have in any of this? The Catholic Archbishop of Nigeria praised the Ugandan President for his "courageous and wise decision" to sign what is known as the “Kill the Gays” bill. The Russian anti-gay bills are widely supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and those who attack gay protestors have been known to carry Orthodox crosses while carrying out their violence. And in Kansas and Arizona, it is Christians of a particular stripe who support the latest effort against LGBT people.

What do we do when we strongly disagree with laws that specifically target a particular group of people? What do we do when we see our religious tradition of Christianity being used in the service of the demonization and denigration of our fellow human beings?

Yes, Jesus says love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, but he also tells us to grow up and live out our God-created identity. We are to live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu recently said: ["I would not worship a God who is homophobic](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/26/desmond-tutu-hell-homophobia_n_3661120.html).” The Irish Catholic Archbishop of Dublin recently wrote, "anybody who doesn't show love towards gay and lesbian people is insulting God. They are not just homophobic if they do that -- they are actually Godophobic because God loves every one of those people." And the Episcopal Bishops in Kansas wrote a letter in response to the anti-gay bill that stated, "Our biblically based faith calls us to live out the command of Jesus Christ to love one another. You cannot love your fellow Kansans and deny them the rights that belong to everyone else." (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/christians-lgbt-rights\_b\_4794753.html?&ncid=tweetlnkushpmg00000055)

The United Methodist Bishop of Kansas, Scott Jones, in a letter to the leader of the Kansas State Senate said “We Kansans helped end slavery and segregation — we do not need to legalize discrimination.” He said he believes that the Kansas bill “represents values that are un-American, un-Kansan and un-Christian.” Grow up and live out our God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you. How can we join our voice and show that God does love everyone? How can we speak out and use our God-given prophetic voice to speak out against the use of violence such as we see in the Ukraine and other places in the world, insisting on the full equality of all? Our faith is being used to do serious harm to people yet Jesus commanded us to step up and stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world.

How do we forgive? Jesus says, “no more tit-for tat stuff.” Jesus says, “let your enemy bring out the best in you, not the worst.” Jesus says, “When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves.” Jesus says anyone can love the lovable.

There was a reporter who was interviewing an old man on his 100th birthday. "What are you most proud of?" he asked. "Well, " said the man, "I don't have an enemy in the world." "What a beautiful thought! How inspirational!" said the reporter. "Yep," added the centenarian, "outlived every last one of them."

What would Jesus say to a gay man living in Russia today? When that man is assaulted by a gang intent on displaying their violence, should he refuse to fight back? Should he turn the other cheek? What would Jesus say to a lesbian woman who is berated by her neighbors? Would Jesus call her to pray for her enemies, hope for their hearts to be softened to her humanity? What if your best friend was just murdered by the government of the Ukraine? Could you stand up and support the changes to government that were agreed to, supporting the same people that murdered your friend? That is what this passage tells us to do. This passage is not encouraging self-sacrifice for the sake of a greater good. Jesus would not call these individuals to a quiet resignation that assumes nothing will change, justice will never prevail.

Jesus is rejecting the way we show our power. Violence and oppression are easy, they seize upon the real or perceived weakness of others. Jesus calls us to resist the powerful not by wielding their weapons against them but by rejecting the very premises of the power they wield. Jesus does not call us to resignation but radical love. Jesus understands how narrow our love can be, how expansive a shape our hatred can take. Jesus sees this in us but also notices something else. Jesus sees how God's love inhabits and transforms us. Jesus sees how broken relationships are made whole as the Spirit moves among us. Jesus sees that justice can reign whenever we love our neighbors, no matter who they are.

God does not deny the sun to the unrighteous, so we should not deny our love and prayers to our enemies or to those who persecute us. Our desire for revenge and to strike back at those who hurt us is so great that it will take God’s love to melt our hearts, a love that, like sunshine, shines on our enemies as well as us.

In a sermon written in a Georgia jail and preached just after the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog… My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. This does not mean that we abandon our righteous efforts. With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community." (A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., page 596)

To love our enemy is to change the situation, to take the power out of their hands and to put it in ours in a positive way. To love the enemy means to understand them as human beings — troubled and sinful human beings who have hurt us because they themselves hurt inside. It means to make a decision to respond to them in ways which will benefit them and perhaps lead to healing.

This does not mean that we sit back and ask for more abuse. It does not mean that the abused wife continues to live with the husband who beats her. No, the loving thing to do, the thing that is in the best interest of the one who is doing the hurting, may be to press charges, to get help for a sickness that is out of control. To do good, to love and forgive those who offend us, is to refrain from hurting them in the same way they have hurt us. It is to initiate a new form of confrontation and healing that will lead to the well-being of all the parties involved. It is an invitation to live positively instead of negatively and to start living a life of proactive discipleship.

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done. It means that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. We must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that the neighbor is. An element of goodness may be found even in our worst enemy. When Jesus asks us to love our enemies he is pleading with us to offer understanding to all people. This is the only way we can truly be children of a loving God. Instead of reacting to the sin of others, instead of basing our response on reward or revenge or reciprocity, we can initiate a new relationship based on love and hope. And we can become fertile ground for abundant life to grow, both for our enemy and for ourselves.

Almighty God, help us turn the other cheek when we are wronged and do so without bitterness. Turn our hearts, that we may learn how to love our neighbor, even our enemies. Teach us and show us the way of holiness, that we may be a holy people. Amen.