



As I have been reminding you the past few weeks, I will soon begin a series of messages titled *I Love the Church Because...* and I have asked you to answer that question for me. I appreciate the responses I have received and I will ask you again to answer that question for me, if you don't mind.

This week we continue the series of messages titled *The Great Commandments*. This week's message is *The Impossible Command?* I've added a question mark because I want you to answer that question for yourself – is it impossible to follow the command to love our enemies? It seems pretty tough to me. When we read these words of Jesus, I think it is very easy to think of that verse as containing an impossible command because, to be honest, I don't know if anyone really takes this passage to its complete expression.

I also doubt that this is anyone's favorite passage of Scripture. You won't find it on a greeting card. We don't put it on a wall hanging or on the front door of our homes. If it was on the front door of your home you wouldn't need to put up a *No Soliciting* sign! It does not adorn pieces of jewelry. I will readily admit that it is not my favorite passage of Scripture, although I have read it many times over the years. I would much rather read – and preach from – passages such as the Beatitudes, (Matthew 5:1-12 – *1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them. He said: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*)

or John 3:16,

(For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.)

or the 23rd Psalm,

(1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth

me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.)

or the Lord's Prayer.

(Matthew 6:9-13 – 9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. 10 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.)

or Philippians 2:1-11,

(1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.)

or the fruits of the Spirit,

(Galatians 5:22-23 – 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.)

But we cannot overlook the difficult passages in favor of the ones that make us feel good. Our text for this morning, especially, is one that must be read and taken to heart because it is what we might call *the heart of the heart*. If the Sermon On the Mount is the heart of the Gospel, which I believe it to be, then this morning's text is *the heart of the heart*. It is a passage in which we truly see the depth of the love of Jesus.

Follow along with me as I read the passage.

Matthew 5:33-48

38 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’*

39 *But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.*

40 *And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.*

41 *If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.*

42 *Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

43 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’*

44 *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Now I'm going to read the passage again, but with a difference. This time I want to bring it into the real world a bit, so to speak. As I read it this time I will leave some blanks, and when I come to a blank, I want you to insert a name; the name of someone with whom you have had a conflict. Or it could be a group, or a political point of view. Insert someone or something that would fall into the category of enemy.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

39 But I tell you, do not resist _____. If _____ slaps you on the right cheek, turn to _____ the other cheek also.

40 And if _____ wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

41 If _____ forces you to go one mile, go with _____ two miles.

42 Give to _____ who asks you, and do not turn away from _____ who wants to borrow from you.

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate _____.'

44 But I tell you, love _____ and pray for _____ who persecute you,

45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on _____ and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and _____.

46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I have preached on this passage a fair number of times over the years, and I'm sure I will plenty more times in the years to come. I continue to refine what I think about this passage and how it should be implemented in our daily lives, and yet the more I study it and the more I preach or teach about it, it remains a passage that haunts me. It haunts me because I cannot explain it away or temper it, because I believe Jesus is not speaking in symbolic terms or using hyperbole as he offered these words. When I read commentaries on this passage, I find that almost all of the writers offer the same basic interpretation – first, they describe the type of slap of which Jesus speaks as being one of insult, not attack. Assuming that most people are right-handed, to strike someone on the right cheek means it would be a backhanded strike, which is generally one of insult, and Jesus means we are not to take an insult to heart but offer forgiveness. Second, the taking of a shirt is interpreted as taking advantage of someone who is poor, or of very modest means, and that person should not claim their right to legal redress, but instead ought to give up what is their right. Third, going the extra mile was an action that could be imposed by a soldier of an occupying army on any member of a civilian population, forcing the person to carry their equipment for a distance of up to one mile, and if such an act occurred one should not be bitter, but offer assistance with kindness and gentleness.

Personally, I don't really buy into any of those interpretations. I think the third one – that of going the extra mile when ordered to do so by a soldier – has historical accuracy but I'm a good deal skeptical about the first two. I am skeptical because I think they too easily explain away what I think is a very direct – and very difficult – command of Jesus. It's very easy to say *in light of the historical context...*(which is a very legitimate tool of interpretation) and then go on to explain away the

fundamental message of what Jesus has to say. While I don't believe every passage of the Bible is to be taken literally (Matthew 5:27-30 is, for example, an example of Jesus using hyperbole to make his point – 27 “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’* 28 *But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* 29 *If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.* 30 *And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*.) In today's text, however, I believe that Jesus meant for his words to be taken literally, and that is very tough to do.

This morning, I want to present three ways of considering this passage, and these represent where I've arrived in relation to this passage. There is much more to say about these verses, but for the sake of time we will consider the following –

1. *We Must Deal in the “What Is,” Not the “What If.”*

Part of the problem we have with this passage, aside from interpreting it away, is that we too easily make it about *what might happen*, that is, we imagine an absolute worst-case scenario that would make a loving, graceful response seem impossible to offer. For instance, we construct a scenario such as *what if someone broke into my home and...*(insert worst-case scenario here). While that *could* happen, it is very unlikely that it *would* happen. When we talk about what *might* or what *could* happen, we place these words in a hypothetical situation, so let's take the discussion about loving our enemies out of the hypothetical and place it in reality, in the here and now, which puts it in an entirely different light.

While it is unlikely that we will have to confront such a difficult situation, I don't believe Jesus was presenting hypothetical scenarios to his listeners. Jesus spoke about the types of situations that many of his listeners had confronted. While we are so blessed that the words of Jesus, when it comes to dealing with enemies, are mostly a hypothetical to us, they were a reality to many of his original listeners. Many of his listeners had experienced horrific acts that few of us can imagine. Many of them had seen friends, neighbors, and family members abused by an occupying military power – the Roman Empire – and many had seen them forced to go the extra mile. Some, no doubt, had seen people with whom they had some connection be crucified. It is very rare that any of us have – or ever will – experience what the audience of Jesus had experienced. But some things are likely to happen to us, such as hurt, betrayal, and conflict. Because of those experiences we will find some people are hard to love and might even come to the point of considering them our enemy.

So *what if* something happens? What if someone betrays you? What if someone hurts you? What if someone turns against you? What do we do in those situations and any of the other types of situations that happen to us in the course of life? Well, we certainly should not become prisoners of anger, hurt, and resentment. And we don't become prisoners of a desire to strike back or the thought of planning revenge. How do you stop the cycle of violence, revenge, and hatred? By not participating in it, and that is what Jesus is asking of us. Holding on to anger and resentment will eat you alive. I'm not saying it's easy to offer forgiveness; it's the hardest thing we are called to do. What I am saying is that it gives us a freedom where bitterness and hatred and a desire for revenge with only bring bondage.

2. *Enemies Are Large Scale and Small Scale.*

One of my bigger questions about this passage is this – was Jesus talking about how we deal with individuals only, or does this passage have some bearing upon how groups – such as nations – deal with one another? We have very real enemies in this world, and I am not naïve enough to ignore that reality. Members of groups such as ISIS would love to bring harm to us. The regime in North Korea would love to strike at our country. Those are kind of distant to our everyday lives.

To be honest, I have always struggled to come up with an answer about how these words of Jesus can be implemented on a large scale, in terms of some kind of foreign policy or how we approach military action, but I can say a few things. First, Jesus is, in this passage, affirming love as the absolute core of his ministry. Love was central to everything about the life and ministry of Jesus, it is the center of all he said and did, and in this passage he is showing how powerful and how outrageous that love is. Love, as defined and demonstrated by Jesus, is something that is far deeper and far more consequential than an emotion that can be expressed in a greeting card saying, or in compassion for kittens and puppies, or even as a way of describing the relationships we have with our friends and family. Love, Jesus says, is something that extends beyond the typical, human categories of love. Love is a wonderful thing, when it deals with people I already love and people who already love me. I find love to be fairly easy when it involves people who love me. I find love fairly easy when it involves people I love. But when I am asked to love those who do not love me, when I am asked to love those who work against me, to love those who seek to harm me – that’s when I begin to wonder if that’s the kind of love I want. But that’s how Jesus defines love. In this passage Matthew uses the Greek word *agape* for love. Of the four Greek words for love it is the one that expresses a divine love, a love that is deeper than any other expression of love. Anybody can love those who already love us, but Jesus is asking *do you want that agape love of God? Do you want the kind of love that goes deeper than any other kind of love we have ever known? Do we want the kind of love that is more powerful than any other force in the world?* If we do, he says, then we must be willing to love even those who hate us.

Second, I’m not sure there is any way to bring these words of Jesus into a discussion of foreign policy and military force. I believe Jesus was a pacifist who would never condone the use of force in any circumstance. Jesus lived in a world in which he saw the muscle of military force on a daily basis. He lived in an occupied land and witnessed firsthand the power of Rome and the way in which that power was often used against his fellow countrymen, but he never remotely expressed any support for the use of force in return. So what does that mean for us, in our context? I believe it means we should remind our leaders that force is not always the answer, and that force should never be used lightly. We are to remind our leaders that many innocents are often the victims of military force and there are no such things as “surgical” strikes that will avoid harm to civilians. Augustine, many centuries ago, gave us the theological framework for what we now call the *Just War Theory*, which is a very helpful guide but even that has its faults and limitations (and is, most of the time, erroneously applied).

Third, there is an inherent conflict between a desire for security and the love of Jesus. The love of Jesus, to which we are called, is risky, even dangerous at times, because it is interested less in security and more in expressing what the love of God represents, such as grace and forgiveness. Living according to that kind of love means that security is not the first priority, which can be very difficult to accept.

3. *How Did Jesus Deal With His Enemies?*

What is one of the most common objections we hear when studying this passage? *Jesus doesn’t want us to be a doormat* is a phrase I have heard many times as an objection to this passage. But can we really think of Jesus as a doormat? I certainly don’t think so. He challenged the religious and political leaders of the day and did not hesitate to do so. When he entered the Temple after the Triumphal Entry he was certainly no doormat. To cast the money-changers out of the temple and to boldly proclaim that *it is written, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers* (Matthew 21:13) is someone who did not hesitate to challenge those in authority. When Jesus confronted the teachers of the law and Pharisees (27 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.* Matthew 23:27-28) it is clear he is

not a doormat. And when Jesus entered into Jerusalem at the Triumphal Entry it was not just a sign of humility and Messiahship; it was also a direct rebuke to Pilate, who would have entered Jerusalem at about the same time as Jesus, although Pilate would have come not on a donkey symbolizing humility and peace, but on a war horse and surrounded with soldiers and implements of war. Does that indicate a *doormat*? I think not.

Jesus was anything but a doormat, and demonstrating love is not at all a sign of being a doormat. There is power in love, and the Romans learned of that power. For all their might and power, the Roman Empire has long ago fallen. What remains of the mighty Roman Empire? Well, there's some pretty good literature, a language that we still study, and some concepts we have found worthy of adopting into our system of government. And there's a bunch of rocks. They're impressive rocks, forming the remains of aqueducts, the Coliseum, the Forum, and other structures, but it's still just a bunch of rocks, symbolizing the once mighty, but now fallen, Roman Empire. It's a reminder that power and force have the illusion of strength but they never, ever have a lasting strength. Power and force may conquer people, but it will not win them over. The Roman Empire conquered the known world but it didn't last. Love proved greater than the power of the Roman Empire. And the love of the church is one of the reasons why the Roman Empire persecuted the church. The Romans understood that if people really took these words of Jesus seriously it would weaken the Empire, and they couldn't stand for that to happen. In spite of the violence inflicted upon the church, though, the love of the church outlasted the Empire. In the Coliseum in Rome there is now a cross that stands where the emperor once sat. The emperor, who oversaw the persecution of Christians in the Coliseum is long gone, and his seat has been replaced by a cross, the symbol of his attempt to vanquish the faith.

If we want to be like Jesus then, truly like Jesus, here is the way. It is not an easy way, but it is The Way.