

## 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18   |
| <i>Response</i>           | The Lord is kind and merciful.  |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13  |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | 1 Corinthians 3:16-23   |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Whoever keeps the word of Christ,<br>the love of God is truly perfected in him. |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | Matthew 5:38-48   |

In the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, we turn to the final section of the antitheses in Matthew 5, which ends with the last two antitheses as well as the call to be perfect — which is a very mysterious passage. So we are going to dive right in and look at Matthew 5:38-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 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. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, these are very familiar passages, but again this is some of the most difficult material in all of the Gospel, because Jesus is saying very strange things, very controversial, difficult, or hard to understand things, like “don't resist one who is evil.” What does that mean? Does that mean if someone is trying to rob me that I should just let them rob me, or if someone's abusing me I should let them abuse me? What is he talking about there? Or “love your enemies.” How am I supposed to love someone who is my enemy? How am I supposed to feel affection for them if they've not only hurt me, but have tried to harm me, kill me, say bad things about me or slander me? What in the world is Jesus getting at here? And then finally, the most problematic of all, what in the world does Jesus mean when he says “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect?” I mean, isn't to err human — the famous saying goes? How is it even possible for him to command me to do something that I know is impossible, namely for me to be perfect. What does that mean? To be flawless? I am a human being, I am a sinner. What is he talking about here and why does he bring this section to an end in this way?

So what I am going to do is just walk through each one of these, try to unpack them, put them in their first century Jewish context and try to shed some light on their meaning. So let's go back up to verse 38, the first one for this week — which is the the fifth antithesis. So Jesus begins by saying “you've heard that it was said [by Moses namely] an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” What's that talking about? Well that is a quotation from the book of Exodus 21:24 in which Moses set up a law that forbids excessive retaliation or excessive vengeance. So in other words, if somebody knocks out your tooth or pokes out your eye, you can't kill their whole family, you can't murder them, which would be an excessive retribution. The punishment has to fit the crime. It can't exceed the gravity or severity of the crime. That is what the image of an eye for an eye, life for a life, tooth for a tooth, that's what it means. Sometimes people think that that passage is an encouragement to vengeance by the Old Testament, but it is actually the opposite. It's restricting punishment so that it doesn't exceed the crime itself. So that's what the old law did, it forbid excessive retaliation.

But Jesus is saying the new law that I'm giving goes way beyond that. It actually enjoins excessive generosity in the face of evil, in the face of harm, in the face of injury. So let's see what that means. Jesus says “but I say to you, do not resist one who is evil.” Now that's the problematic verse that usually throws people off. Is

Jesus giving license here to abuse? Is he trying to call his disciples to be doormats to be walked all over by everyone? It is understandable that it might sound that way, unless you put the verse in context. In other words, if you want to know what an open-ended saying like that means, you should look at the examples that Jesus gives. So he doesn't go on to say “if your husband is beating you, let him keep beating you.” That's not the image that he gives there.

Let's look at each one of the examples that he gives. The first image. He says this, “if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” So what does this mean, to strike on the right cheek? Well if you go back to the book of Job 16:10 or the book of Lamentations 3:30, you will see that the imagery of striking someone on the right cheek is like the gravest form of insult you can give someone. It's a kind of public humiliation of another person. So what Jesus is saying here is that if someone insults you or humiliates you, how do you respond to that? You give them the other cheek as well. So it's a kind of totally unexpected and radical response to being insulted by another person. You'll see this is also another example of — we've seen this before in the Sermon on the Mount — hyperbole, where Jesus is exaggerating in order to make a point. Stay with me and you'll see what I mean.

Look at the next one, the next example. “If someone sues you for your coat, let him have your cloak as well.” Now we might just think that means if someone wants one garment, give him the other garment too. But in a first century context it is a little more technical than that, because what Jesus actually says is “if someone sues you for your *chitōn*, which is your undergarment. In other words, your underwear, which would honestly be a ridiculous lawsuit. Someone is trying to take everything you have if they're suing you for your undergarment, if they're suing you for your underwear. What Jesus says is “if they sue you for your undergarment, [do something completely unexpected] give them your outer garment as well,” your *himation* is the Greek, your outer cloak as well. In other words, give them everything so you have nothing left over. So if someone tries to take your essential clothing, your undergarment, you give them the cloak as well.

Okay, look at the next example. “If someone forces you to go one mile, go two.” So this is an example that makes sense in a first century Jewish context as well. He's talking about conscripted labor here. The classic case of this is Simon of

Cyrene. So the Roman soldier is bringing Jesus out to Gethsemane and he gets Simon of Cyrene, who was a passerby, he says “come over here,” carry this cross, go to Golgotha. They had the authority to conscript you for labor like that. So what Jesus is saying here is that if someone — in this case it would probably be a Roman — would conscript you to go one mile, how do you respond to that insult? How do you respond to that injury? He says with radical and excessive generosity. In other words, I'll give you two miles as well. Notice what we're seeing here. The pattern in each one of these is you respond to injury with generosity, you respond to insult with an unexpected generosity, and you can see that in each one of these of responses, you give them the other cheek totally unexpected, you give them your other garment totally unexpected, you go the extra mile — that has become a saying — totally unexpected. Most people stop there when they try to explain this passage. But if you notice, generosity, the theme, continues with the next two examples. The passage doesn't stop there, look at the next two examples.

“Give to him who begs from you, and don't refuse him who would borrow from you.” Again, two more cases of giving something. In this case, someone begs from you, so how do we respond to that? With generous almsgiving, not figure out if they are worthy of it or if they deserve it. If someone asks from you, if they beg from you, give to them. And there is actually a passage in the Old Testament from Deuteronomy 15 — this is standard Jewish law — it says “open wide your hand to your brother who is in need.” So don't just give grudgingly, but give generously. And the same thing here, if someone wants to borrow from you, what do you do? You loan the money, you give them the money. So lend to him who asks for a loan.

So in each one of these cases, what Jesus is talking about is the way we respond to evil in the world, the way we respond to injury, the way we respond to other people's need, is with radical generosity; not with vengeance, not with retaliation, not with violence, but with generosity. And you'll see the same principle is going to be passed on in the early Church by St. Paul. He sums it up in Romans 12:21 when he says “do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” That is Jesus's recipe here. In other words, quench the evil with a radical and unexpected generosity in the face of such evil, and also alleviate suffering with a radical and unexpected generosity in the face of suffering or depravation or want. So what

does that mean? Jesus is going way beyond, way beyond, the Old Testament law of just justice. Now he's moving to a New Testament law of mercy and generosity.

Before we move on to the six antithesis, I need to be clear on something here. If you look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church, there is a very important paragraph that deals with this particular text about “do not resist evil.” In the Catechism, paragraph 2263-2267 and 2302-2303, the Church has a teaching which she calls legitimate defense. And the Church makes very clear in it's tradition that Jesus’ teaching in this particular antithesis does not exclude legitimate self-defense, either of one's own person or even more importantly of the duty to defend others who have been entrusted to us, whether it's a father's duty to defend his wife and his children in the face of an unjust aggressor, or the state's duty to defend its citizens in the face of an unjust aggressor. So Jesus’ teaching here is not at odds with legitimate self-defense, and if we had more time we could go into where that is in Scripture, but you can look at the Catechism if you want a layout of that. But what Jesus is getting at here is that in the new law we don't stop purely at an “eye for an eye” or a “tooth for a tooth” with retribution. We transcend retribution by giving back not vengeance or justice, but in this case giving mercy and giving generosity. So that's the posture of response to insult and injury that he wants his disciples to embody in the new covenant.

With that said, the sixth antithesis, in a sense, flows right out of the fifth, and it proves that point, when Jesus calls on his disciples to love their enemies. So he begins this one by saying "you have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” Well, what is he talking about? He's alluding there to, again, the law of Moses. In the book of Leviticus 19:18, Moses is very explicit, he says “you shall love your neighbor.” Sometimes people think Jesus came up with the idea of loving one's neighbor. It’s not Jesus, it's the Jewish law of Moses, it’s the Pentateuch of the Old Testament. So he takes that straight out of the Old Testament, but he also says “you have heard it said that you should ‘hate your enemy.’” That is a little more difficult, because nowhere in the Old Testament is there ever a command to hate one's enemy. It’s interesting.

In fact, in the book of Exodus 23 and in Proverbs 25, it actually says very clearly that you should do good to your enemies. So if your enemy’s ox falls into a pit, or something like that, you should help it out. So the idea of doing good to your

enemies is actually an Old Testament teaching as well. So what does Jesus mean when he says “you have heard it said you should ‘hate your enemy.’” We don't know, but most scholars think that Jesus is alluding here to the law of harem warfare, where the Israelites were commanded by Moses to completely wipe out their enemies in the holy land; like the Canaanites, the Perizzites and the Jebusites. This is sometimes called holy war, but that is not actually what it means. It is harem warfare, a complete destruction of all their enemies. Sometimes people think that that's what Jesus is alluding to when he says “you've heard it was said to ‘hate your enemy.’” I think that's probably right, but we don't know for sure.

In any case, Jesus is going to go and give a very different law, “but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” So again, this is one of the passages where people say “how can I possibly love my enemy, right? I don't feel the slightest affection for this person who stole from me, or this person who abused me, or even this person who murdered my spouse or my child. I could never love them. I could never feel any affection for them.” Well it is important to remember that in the Bible, love, although it can be expressed through affection, is not defined as an emotion. It is not defined as a feeling, although we tend to think of love as a feeling. Love, the definition of love in the Bible, is to choose the good for another person. It's to will the good for another. So in other words, it is not an emotion, it's an act of the will, it's a choice. So in this context, what does Jesus mean when he says “you will love your enemies”?

Well he tells us, he gives us the definition in the next verse, “you shall pray for those who persecute you.” That's it right there. No matter what you feel about someone who's hurt you, if you pray for them, if you ask the Lord to bless them, if you ask God to bless them and to give good things to them, to bring about their repentance, to give them life and health, that is an act of love. To pray for someone else is to take your precious time and use it for their benefit and for their good, and that alone is an act of love. So it is very important for you to understand that you don't have to feel anything toward an enemy to love your enemy. You just have to do good to that enemy, especially by praying for them, by interceding for them and by offering penance and sacrifices for them. And in doing so Jesus says “you'll be like God, you'll be like the Father in heaven.” Why? Well look at the world. It is

full of wicked people and yet what happens? The sun comes up every day. He makes the sun shine on the unjust and the just.

So if you have any questions like does God love sinners? Well, did the sun come up today? And the answer is yes. He makes his rain fall on the the just and the unjust. Same thing, does God love the wicked? Does he love the violent? Does he love the sinful? Well, he gave the rain from heaven that gives us water to drink and food to eat. So the answer is yes. So what he's calling for in this final passage is for us to love our enemies just like God loves his enemies. And when we do that we become children of God, we become sons of the Father, because we more perfectly image God's love when we love someone who hates us than when we love someone who loves us. And that's what he is going to go on to show there, he says “even the pagans [or the Gentiles], they love people who love them. Even tax collectors...” — notice Jesus here is like “an IRS agent is the worst possible human being you can have. Even the tax collectors love those who love them. That’s not the bar we’re setting here for the new law of love, for the new covenant. We’re setting a divine bar here. We are going to love those who hate us, even the Gentiles, even the pagans, love those who love them. But we have to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.”

Before I move on let me say this one thing. I was recently reading St. Catherine of Siena's dialogues and in it she says something very interesting. She says that “the reason God created multiple human beings, the reason he gave us neighbors who he knew would harm us, hurt us, insult us and sin against us, was because he wanted us to love with the most perfect kind of love, which is to love like he loves.” If he had just created one human being, that human being could love God, but God is perfect, he deserves our love. He is not our enemy, he is our Creator, and he's worthy of all of our love. But see, God doesn't just love those who are good, God loves those who are evil. He loves his enemies. So in order to perfect our love, St. Catherine says, “God made our neighbor so that we can love those who don't love us, so we can love those who hate us, and in that way our love would be more God-like, because God loves not just the just, he loves the unjust.” So this is why the Saints have always said, “love of neighbor is in a certain sense the highest form of love, and it is certainly necessary for salvation, because it is God-like to love those who don't love us.” Whereas when we love God, we love

someone who does love us. That is just a little aside, but I thought it was a pretty cool and interesting insight.

In closing then, what is Jesus calling us to in the Sermon on the Mount? Well, the last thing he says is “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Now is he serious, I mean come on, what could this possibly mean? Again, we want to think of it like a first century Jew. How would they have heard it? They would've heard an echo of the book of Leviticus, which is actually the first reading for this week. So if you look at the first reading, Leviticus 19:1-2 and 19:17-18 has two commandments. “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy” is the first part, and then “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Now why is that significant? Well, what it shows is that in the Old Testament the command was “you shall be holy.” That is Moses’ goal. That’s the vocation of the Israelites, to be holy. What does that mean? Well when most of us think of the word holy, we think of somebody who's really, really, really good, and maybe a little uptight about it too. We don’t think of holiness the way they did.

But in the Old Testament, that is not what holiness meant. The word holy meant separated, literally *qadosh*, to be separate. So what Moses is saying is, he is calling Israel to be separate, separated from sin, and separated for God. That's what holy means, set apart **from** sin and set apart **for** God. But Jesus goes beyond that. He doesn't just want us to be holy, set apart from sin, he wants us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. The Greek word there is *teleios*, which doesn't just mean perfect, it means complete. Most of us when we think of perfect, we think flawless. Well in this life that's not possible because we are all sinners. We can't be without fault or without flaw, but we can be complete. Christ is calling us to be complete, to be *teleios*. The word *telos* means goal or end, so he is calling us to meet our goal. What is our end? To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as our self. And this is really what the universal call to holiness is all about.

Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* chapter 11 paragraph 3 says this, “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect.” So Vatican II makes it very clear that when Jesus says “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” he is not just talking to nuns or to priests or to consecrated religious — sometimes

Catholics can be tempted to think that “well the Sermon on the Mount, that's for the religious, that's for the priests, that's for the nuns.” No! Vatican II said the call to holiness and the call to the perfection of love is a universal call, it's a universal call to holiness. And that can be very easily proved by looking at the New Testament itself. One other passage in the New Testament — I'll end with this — in Hebrews 12, the author of Hebrews is describing heaven, describing the heavenly Jerusalem that we are all going to eventually, God willing, reach as our final destiny. And it says this, “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven...and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” There the root is the same word as Jesus uses, *teleios*, perfect, complete. So you may say, “is it possible for human beings to be perfect?” Well according to the New Testament, yes it is, because that's exactly the word that's used to describe the saints in heaven. And because our ultimate vocation is to heavenly beatitude, then Jesus's words here are not a command to do something that's impossible, but a command to do something that is possible, but only with the grace of God. Because he says elsewhere, “with God all things are possible” and that's the vocation to the perfection of charity that he's giving us in this beautiful, beautiful section on the Sermon on the Mount.