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“The Holiness Difference”

Text: Matthew 5:38-48; Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words of Jesus we heard today is one of those texts that is both loved and hated. It is generally loved by those who are not Christian, who love to throw these words in the face of Christians, especially when they are pounding on us in one way or another. *You have to turn the other cheek. Jesus told you to love your enemies.* There are lots of Jesus' words they don't like and so ignore, but these are good ones, helpful ones, for them, so they like them.

And so also these words are generally hated by those who are Christian, especially when we're being pounded on! *Jesus can't be serious. Turn the other cheek? Go the extra mile, give the extra cloak? Love this guy (or this girl) who is doing this to me and pray for them?* There are lots of Jesus' words we like and so keep, but these we really don't like and so perhaps ignore.

If that's so, then the only difference between us and those who aren't Christian are which words of God we like and keep and so use, and those we really don't like so much and so ignore. We're no better. We need to repent.

But we need to understand these words too. So, what is Jesus really saying here?

Well first off, here's what these words DON'T mean: they *don't* mean you have to just sit there and let someone beat on you. They *don't* mean an abused spouse has to continue to be abused. They *don't* mean you have to let yourself be taken advantage of. You *can* defend yourself. If God gave you two legs to run and get out of there, then get out of there! It is an over-spiritualization of the text to think that we cannot do those things.

It's like when you pray *give us this day our daily bread*, you still go to the supermarket, right? You don't expect bread to fall from heaven and onto your table. That would be an *over-spiritualization*. God could do that if He wants - make bread fall from heaven. He did in fact, in the past, with the manna in the desert. But He also uses other means to provide what we need. That doesn't mean we don't trust Him - just that He is using others to provide what we need.

Or as Luther once told his class of future pastors: Don't think that because God loves His Church and has promised to care for His Church that there's nothing you have to do as a pastor, and you can just sit back and be all fat and lazy! No. That is an *over-*

spiritualization. God has put you there to use you to care for His Church. You do what you're given to do.

So then, what's a Christian to do? What are you do to in those situations where you're getting pounded on or taken advantage of or in all the many difficult situations you might find yourself in this world? Jesus said it: what you're given to do as a Christian is **love**. That's what the verses right before this that we heard last week were talking about. *What does love look like?* It looks likes that. It's not what the world often thinks love is - an ooey gooey feeling, an emotion that comes and goes. It is much more than that. It is the will, the desire for what's best for another. It is to be for them, not to set yourself against them. It is to turn to them, not turn yourself away from them. It is what couples promise in their wedding vows. I will love you. Even if that ooey gooey feeling isn't there anymore, I will love you, I will be there for you, I will not turn away from you. And so for a married couple, it is no longer me and you, but now us.

The challenge for us as Christians is to see others in the world that way too. Not as opponents, but as someone who needs my love. Someone for me not to be against, but to be for. Not to take revenge, but to forgive them and pray for them.

The Old Testament reading said that as well: *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*. (And even if your neighbor isn't being very neighborly!) But it also put it this way: *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*.

Now, we need to think about *that* for a moment. For we use that word *holy* a lot in Church, but what does it mean? Well it literally means *to be set apart*; to be set apart for a godly use. And in this context, the context of Christians living in an increasingly non-Christian world, in an increasingly *anti-Christian* world, perhaps we could say it like this: BE DIFFERENT. Don't be like the world, don't act the same, don't go along - *be different*.

But we're afraid to be different. We try to be like the world, and want to be liked by the world. We don't want to stand out and be made fun of. But your mother was right. Your mother was right when she said: *if everyone else jumps off a bridge, does that me you have to?*

No, be holy. Be different. Be set apart for the Lord. For He has set you apart. He has chosen you to be His son, His daughter. He has brought you into His Church. He has forgiven your sins. He has given you His Spirit. Which makes you pretty special, pretty important. And so, He says in Leviticus, *be different*. Don't be greedy and harvest everything right up to the very edges of your field - *be different*. Don't try to get as much as you can by dealing falsely and lying - *be different*. Don't oppress, or withhold, or be partial - *be different*. Don't hate or take vengeance or hold a grudge - *be different*. Be holy. I am the LORD.

I am the LORD. Did you notice that is said over and over again? I am the LORD. I am the LORD. But that's not just God saying: *I'm God and so you have to do what I say . . . or else!* (Like parents say sometimes!) No, that's not who God is. I am the LORD means: I am the one who created you and gave you life. I am the one who promised you a Saviour to redeem you and give you eternal life. I am the one who provides for you and cares for you. I am the one who chose you. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt. I am the one who promised you a home. I am the one who is on your side and will always be. I am the LORD.

And you are mine. You don't have to worry about those things. You don't belong to the world and its ways. You belong to me, and that makes you different. So be different. In a selfish world, *be different*: be selfless. In a world that more and more sees death as the answer, *be different*: choose life. In a world of sin, *be different*: be holy.

And those differences are more and more stark, it seems, everyday. For the world is no longer content to make fun of you if you're different - it wants to persecute you if you don't go along with it. If you don't agree with their agenda of abortion on demand, of 58 different gender choices now on Facebook, of not just tolerating or accepting but being *proud* of those who say they're gay (which now seems like what the world wants to be the new normal!) - then you aren't just stupid or old fashioned anymore, you're dangerous, and so you must be marginalized, demonized, and eliminated.

What's a Christian to do? The answer's the same: ***Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*** Do not set yourself up against them or turn away from them. ***Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.***

Which is the very picture of Jesus, who did not set Himself against even those who put Him on the cross, but prayed for them and even more, died for them. Yes, for Jesus didn't just die for nice people, or good people, or church people, but for all people, including those we don't like, those who hurt us, those we don't think He should have died for.

But He did, because Jesus knew it's not us against each other - the real enemy is satan. Or as Paul put it: *we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6:12). And as we heard from Jesus today: ***God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*** God is not the enemy of those who do not believe - He loves them and sent His Son to die for them too. Which is good because *you used to be one of those folks*. An unbeliever. Before God called you and set you apart and baptized you and forgave you your sins and made you His child. And so for us to set ourselves against others in this world - no matter how ornery or hurtful they may be - is to mistake the

enemy and *fight the wrong fight*. Jesus saw what we cannot see, and so fought the *right* fight. On the cross.

An early church father named Theodore of Mopsuestia said: *we have eyes to see what is visible, and faith to see what is invisible*. Unless something is wrong with your eyes, or with your faith. And there is something wrong with us, by nature. Sin has taken away our spiritual eyesight, to see things correctly, as they really are. We have been blinded by the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4) so that we cannot see things as they are; so that we cannot see evil as evil and good as good, but in fact think evil good and good evil. Which is what we see happening so much these days, as that which used to be considered evil is now touted as good and proper and BETTER. And those who speak good are vilified as phobic, as haters, as evil.

And so Jesus has come to teach us - in His Word and in His life - how to see. To restore our spiritual sight. To see our sin, to see Him as Saviour, and to see the enemy aright.

And so those who hurt us and persecute us - they're not the enemy. They've been *taken in* by the enemy. They need us. To love them enough to pray for them. To love them enough to stand for the truth and not let them continue merrily on their way to hell. To love them enough to be different - to show them another way.

Because that's what satan wants them to believe - there's only one way, this way. That's why many, many women have abortions, that's why many, many people give in to their sexual urges and aberrations, that's why many hate, or oppress, or kill themselves - they think it's the only way, the only answer they have.

But it's not the only way. There is a *different* way. Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That's the foundation of which Paul is speaking in Corinthians, writing to a Church filled with problems and struggles, in the midst of a world full of problems. That's the foundation of the Church in which the Spirit dwells, to point us and the world to the answer to those problems: the forgiveness and life of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Only in Him is the forgiveness we need. Only in Him is the life that we seek. Only in Him is the love that we desire. And so only in Him is the perfection we require. *His by nature, yours by grace*. Yours to come again and receive in the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. For you to live in Him and He in you. He in you wherever you go, to be holy, to be different, to be a little Christ, a Christian, in a world that needs that now as much as ever.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.