

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor  
“Resisting Evil While Loving Enemies”  
Matthew 5: 38-48  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 19, 2017**

Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying that he has come not to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

He then proceeded to illustrate how this is so by giving six examples where the heart of the law is fulfilled, in effect saying, “Here is what the law says, and I am going to the heart of that law to show how citizens in the kingdom of heaven live out its deepest meaning here on earth.” Each of the examples is introduced by the formula, “you have heard it said...but I say to you.” (1) You will hear this formula twice in today’s Scripture lesson.

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These two statements, spoken by Jesus and recorded by Matthew in the first century, almost surely addressed concrete situations or questions that had arisen in the congregation for whom Matthew was writing.

And when we read the statements from our 21<sup>st</sup> century vantage point and consider that those for whom Matthew was writing were in need of some counsel as they dealt with their impulses to retaliate against those who had caused them pain and wrestled with how to love those who were out to get them, our first impulse is to say, “Gee, the world hasn’t changed all that much!” When one begins with the premise that the world hasn’t changed all that much, these commands become arrows to pull out of our discipleship quiver to aim at situations when we and people we love have been wronged, like say, when the petty, poison-minded new boss sweeps in and summarily and unfairly fires my wife from a job that she had poured her energy, intelligence, and imagination into for countless years, the ex-spouse who drains the bank account, leaving us high and dry, the former best friend who spreads vicious and false rumors about us and makes going to school feel like facing a firing squad on a daily basis.

In many ways, the world hasn’t changed all that much. Evil is still very real. Christians still need, we deeply need, all the help that we can get so that we can bear the mind of Christ within us and name evil and resist it when it is leveled against us and against people whom we love.

When I have drilled down into this text, however, it strikes me that Matthew’s task in preaching to the congregation whom he served is quite different from the task of any preacher who would preach to a congregation like Davidson College Presbyterian Church. There is a great deal that is different when one compares that first-century congregation to this particular twenty-first century congregation.

Primary among the differences is this: Jesus lived and carried out his ministry in an occupied Palestine that was a Roman province. Matthew wrote his gospel in a post-Temple, post-Jerusalem, post-destruction reality. (2)

Matthew's congregation was largely made up of people who were for all intents and purposes powerless against the Roman Empire. When you read "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek," think: if a Roman soldier strikes you on the right cheek... When you read "if anyone takes your coat," think: if a Roman soldier takes your coat... When you read "if anyone forces you to go one mile," think: if a Roman soldier forces you to go one mile...

It brings to mind the example of Ruby Bridges:

In 1960, the psychiatrist Robert Coles was working with Ruby Bridges, a little girl who went to one of the elementary schools in New Orleans—the Frantz School. "Here was a six-year-old girl who was being threatened with death every day by a hostile mob because she was an African-American child who was desegregating a school. And amidst all those threats and all the danger (she had to be escorted to school by federal marshals), there she was, and I was trying to find out how she was doing amidst all this. I'll never forget one day when I tried to apply my knowledge of psychiatry to her activity. I said to her, "Ruby, every day you go through that mob and they're screaming at you, and I was wondering what crosses your mind when they do that." Now there's a doctor at work, a child psychiatrist at work, trying to find out what is happening to a little child who's facing grave danger. And you can imagine what I was thinking—the various psychological maneuvers and so-called "mechanisms of defense" that would be happening in Ruby's mind as she faced this terrible danger. After I asked my question, she looked at me—I'll never forget her—she just looked at me, and she said, "Well, you know, Dr. Coles, I pray for them." So I looked hard at her, and I said, "You pray for them, Ruby?" She said, "Oh yes, I pray for them every morning when I walk by that crowd." And I said, "Ruby, you pray for them, given all that goes on and all they're saying and threatening?" She looked at me, and she said, "Well, don't you think they need praying for?" (3)

In presenting Jesus's words to his congregation, Matthew was preaching to a congregation of Rubys. He was calling these so-called "powerless" Christians, as Ruby's parents and her pastor called her, to defiance of evil, not defiance against the evildoers, the enemies, themselves, since this would simply perpetuate and intensify hate and brutality, but rather to a deeper defiance directed against the vicious, endless cycle of enemy making. (4)

Jesus and Matthew preached to congregations largely made up of Rubys. Their word to those congregations was an empowering and an encouraging word.

In this, my experience as a preacher differs from theirs in at least one significant way.

As I have drilled down into Jesus's words, preparing to a congregation of Christians largely privileged by virtue of our race, our level of education, our socioeconomic status, our citizenship in the most powerful nation on the planet, the passage has become God's *interrogating* word to me and, I trust, to you. It directs me to ask of myself and of you:

Where in my life by virtue of my privilege do I strike someone on the right cheek?

How by participating in unjust systems do I take someone's coat or force them to walk along a path that I, even unknowingly, dictate?

How might I be rightfully judged by the way that I live as participating in evil?

Every now and then, someone asks me what books have had a strong influence on my life. As you might guess, the Bible is Number One on that list. But there is another book that has profoundly influenced me too.

It is the book *The Children of Pride*, a massive collection of letters written by the Jones family of Midway County, Georgia, during the years 1854-1868. This was a deeply Presbyterian family. They were wonderfully educated, devout and intelligent, articulate and caring. They were “good people,” good people who bought, owned, and sold slaves because they simply could not see past the blinders of the past of their Southern heritage and the present of their economic and racial privilege.

*Children of Pride* interrogated me and convicted me when I read it many years ago. Thirty years after Robert Manson Myers collected the letters that became *The Children of Pride*, Erskine Clarke expanded on Myers’s work in his book *Dwelling Place* by telling the other side of the story, the story of the black individuals whose lives were interwoven with the Jones family. On my better, more faithful days, I remember the Jones family and pray that God might remove the blinders that my privilege places upon my attempts at discipleship so that my eyes are cleared to see the ways in which I need to be freed of my participation in evil.

Because the ultimate place toward which God is always leading us, the kingdom of heaven of which Jesus spoke and Matthew preached, it is a place of freedom. It is the place of freedom that comes from knowing that we are saved not by our works, but by grace, that God loves us and saves us, that Jesus went to the cross in order to invite us into relationships that are governed not by power but by vulnerability grounded in love.

I close with one last observation. The last line of the passage, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” helps to reframe the whole of this passage. For while *telos*, the Greek word employed here, can indeed be translated “perfect,” it typically denotes something not so much morally perfect as it does something that has grown up, matured, and now reached its perfect end. That is, *telos* is the goal or desired outcome of a thing.

Thus, it seems right to say, as David Lose does, that Jesus is not simply commanding us to be perfect, but also commending something in us. (5) Having been interrogated, convicted, and set free through the gift of God’s grace, we have more to learn and more to give.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 55.
2. Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on Matthew 5: 38-48,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), February 19, 2017.
3. John Cox, “A Life in Psychiatry and Literature: An Interview with Robert Coles,” *Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Summer 2005), 563-75.
4. Matthew Myer Boulton, “Homiletical Perspective: Matthew 5: 38-48,” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*,” edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 385.
5. David Lose, “The Revolution States Here,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), February 18, 2014.