

The question is 'How then should we live?' That is the title of this series on the Sermon on the Mount and is a key question if we are to understand what Jesus is saying to his disciples both then and now in this passage we have today.

If I were to ask you how God would have us live as his children what would you say? What characteristics should shape the way we live? We might respond with words like love, obedience, trust, truth, and so on. I would agree but perhaps want to add the word 'godly' to each of those because I think that what we see through the sermon on the mount and especially in this passage is that as Christians we are called to live Christ's way so let's have a look at these verses and see what that way looks like and try and work out what that means practically for us.

How then should we live?

1. with grace and mercy

Jesus makes it clear here how we should live when he says "I tell you do not resist an evil person" (v38). I don't know about you but that raises all sorts of questions for me. If I am being mugged should I just stand back and let it happen? If we are not to resist the evil person should we abandon our armed forces and not join the police force?

I don't think Jesus has those things in mind at all.

We need to understand the context so bear with me while we use our brains a bit.

The context here is that statement of the law "you have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth'." (v38) In our day it sounds a bit draconian and harsh but the point of the law originally was to restrict the action of the wronged person and prevent an escalation of retribution. We can I hope understand that. Little Jonny gets hit by little Billy so Jonny goes and gets his big brother Fred who hits Billy who goes and gets his two big brothers Sam and Mike and so it escalates. The law was there to restrict and also the law was given to God's people not for use in personal vendettas. However by the time of Jesus both those things were in abeyance and the thinking was how far can my personal retaliation go without breaking the law?

So Jesus spoke to his disciples to give them and that includes us a different perspective. He gave four little cameos to explain it further.

- a. v39 Here what is described with the blow on the cheek is a back hand blow and that was an insult. If insulted the normal desire is to stand up for ourselves and to get our own back. But Jesus said no. Ask the question will anyone be won for the kingdom by your retaliation? If insulted then bear it.
- b. v40 The Pharisees being people of the law seemed to love the law courts. If a matter was in dispute they went to law to try and establish their rights. But here Jesus says we should not have a

selfish attitude to property or rights. If someone went to law against you for the relatively small sum of your tunic don't battle but give him your coat as well.

c. v41 The Pharisees found the Roman occupation of Israel very difficult to cope with. So when called upon to bear a soldier's burden for a mile as the law allowed they might do it but very unwillingly. Their unwillingness to be involved in such service reminds that some years back it was reported in the press that buses from Hanley to Bagnall in Staffordshire no longer stopped to pick up passengers. The situation came to light when one passenger complained that buses on the outward journey regularly sailed past queues of people. A Councillor then made transport history by stating that if these buses stopped to pick up passengers they would disrupt the timetable. Jesus says don't be unwilling to give such service even if you have no option do it and indeed go over and above what is duty. His point is let people see you belong to another empire with a different Emperor!

d. v42 There were laws and rules as to how much to give to whom and when. Jesus said forget such rules but if someone asks simply give.

Now I wonder how you respond to all this? I know how I respond. I begin to ask, am I meant to be a doormat and let people walk all over me? Am I meant to just give all I have away and as a result have nothing?

But can you see that even as I ask the questions like that I am becoming like a Pharisee and wanting to limit what Jesus said, wanting to reduce the effect of what Jesus was saying to something I can cope with, just as the Pharisees did with many of the laws.

We need to see what Jesus was asking here and what he was asking was that in their relationships rather than live by law his disciples should live by grace and mercy.

However, we are very much even as Christians bound up with ourselves. It is related of Oscar Wilde that he was standing on his own at a party when his hostess came up to him, "are you enjoying yourself Mr Wilde?" she asked. "Yes I am," he replied, "there's nothing else here to enjoy." Our concern with self shows in our actions. So when I am insulted, by the slap on the face as it were, my self esteem is hurt and causes me to fight back. Self is at work. I'm hurt I want to get back at someone. If someone takes me to court even if perhaps they may have a case I will fight it that is my right and if they have done some wrong against me I will take them to court to establish and gain my rights. I don't mind helping people but I don't like being put upon. I hate people presuming I will do things for them because it means they see me as a servant a slave there at their beck and call. I will give but there is a limit because I have limited finance and I have many needs. Now in all these areas there is self at work. Self esteem when insulted. My rights in the law courts. My personal liberty when people presume upon me and my needs when others ask for things. There is so much of self wrapped up here.

Jesus doesn't want us hung up on these illustrations but on the principle that as his followers our lives and our relationships should be marked by mercy and grace. That was how he lived and we should follow his pattern.

Our response to these words should not be to analyse each scenario and ask but what about this or that but to ask what marks my dealings with others is it myself and my rights or is it God's grace and mercy?

The question we are asking ourselves as we think of how we can, "in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ" (Eph 4:15) is 'How then should we live' and Jesus here suggests our lives should be marked by mercy and grace.

2. in love for others

If the first part here is hard it now seems to get harder because Jesus takes this living by grace and mercy even further as he shows his disciples what should be the extent of their mercy in their love for others, which is summed up in the words "love your enemies" v44.

That friends is really showing mercy where we can actually love our enemies and pray for them wanting the best from God for them.

If we only love those who love us, he goes on to point out in v47, then we are no different from the rest of the world. Jesus way was very different and his way was the way of love even for his enemies. We see this supremely on the cross when he prayed for those who had put him there.

He reminds his disciples that God's love and his mercies are indiscriminate, he "causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good" (v45).

God's love knows no limits. As Paul reminded his Christian friends in Rome "God demonstrates his own his unique love for us in that while we were still sinners (while we were in rebellion against God at odds with him and his enemies), Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8). That is God's perfect love. A love which sacrificed his own son for his enemies. Now Jesus says to his disciples mirror that love. We as 'sons of your Father in heaven' should similarly display God's characteristics and our love should be to all.

We should not be seeking revenge and working out retaliation on those who cause us grief but in mercy showing love for them and praying for them.

3. How then should we live?

a. let's recognise the real problem here is ourselves. Then in the light of that

b. let's reflect. This week at home, at church, at work wherever reflect on your reactions to people around you. When something happens that perhaps annoys you or gets under your skin before you respond ask yourself is my response born out of self and my rights or out of grace and mercy.

c. let's respond. That is let us not just be aware of the problem but let's do something about it. The call is to be perfect and we are never going to be that but let's not stay as we are because I would imagine that most of us as we read these words think I can't do that.

Having children has greatly broadened my education in many ways but especially in my reading and knowledge of children's stories. Before I had children I had never been aware of the story of Alice in Wonderland. But now have read it and seen a cartoon version many many times. As I was struggling with Matt 5.38-48 I was reminded of the part in the story where Alice following the white rabbit comes to a door. Through the keyhole she can see the white rabbit disappearing in the distance. She pulls at the door handle to no avail and the door says "it is no good I'm impassable." "Don't you mean impossible?" Alice replied. "No impassable. You can't get through." I felt the passage was impassable I couldn't get through it and then when I did get a handle on understanding it I thought it was impossible. Impossible to put into action. As you listen you may think that I just can't do this. I can't turn the other cheek or love my enemies. No of course you can't it is impossible. However, Jesus says to us very clearly 'don't resist the evil one' and 'love your enemies'. He clearly wants or actually commands us to do that and he adds 'be perfect'.

So he is saying do it and we are saying I can't. Who is right? In case you are in any doubt the answer is....Jesus.

This was new teaching to these disciples and while it may not be new teaching to us we recognise that we are disciples that is learners and we are not going to perfect this overnight.

I had a birthday card from one of my grandsons this week. Look at it on the screen and for those listening on down load it is the effort of a 5 year old spelled wrongly and with badly formed letters. It is rubbish isn't it? Only fit to be ripped up. Of course not. I recognise that Caleb is only 5 and what the card shows is his best effort and what I understand is his love and that if he carries on trying he will get better.

Discipleship is about learning and growing. Today's message is hard for us to hear and even harder for us to do. We may well have had many years of focussing on self and we live in a society where demanding our personal rights is the agreed way. No wonder we find this hard. Following Jesus is not going to be easy after all his willingness to put aside his rights, his willingness to turn the other cheek and to love his enemies led him to the cross.

Today in church and in your home and tomorrow at work Jesus calls you to live in love and respond to others with mercy – simples!