

WEEKEND Edition 07/08 May 2022 "Radical Living" (Matt. 5:38-48)

Good weekend to you my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

I begin this weekend with a question: When you see injustice, unfairness, corruption or distortion of truth, what is your response? Evil and wickedness have been a big part of the human journey since the days of Adam and Eve, so the evidence of evil that you and I face wherever you live is nothing new, is it? In every society of the world, we have police and laws and courts and judges and prisons. But what about the personal encounters we all have with evil every day?

Let's rejoin Matthew as he is reflecting on the words of the first big public speech Jesus gave which Matthew recorded in chapters 5,6,7 of his book in the New Testament. We've come to verse 38 where Jesus said some shocking things: **"You have heard it said, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."** (Matt. 5:38-42) For those Jews in the crowd listening to Jesus, His reference to **'an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth'** (Exodus 21:23-25) would have caused them to nod in agreement, perhaps enthusiastic agreement. That system of justice was part of the original laws of social order God had given to the Hebrew slaves coming out of Egypt who needed some justice, fairness and structure as they formed a new society. You find those in Exodus 21,22,23. *Violence and injustice was all they had known as slaves, and they needed a fair, logical, common-sense system of justice, to build a God honoring society.*

As the nation of Israel developed, God's system of justice worked amazingly well through the centuries, but now these Jews were living again under the domination of a power, the Roman Empire, who had no regard for the God of the Jews. While they were not in slavery as they had been in Egypt, the authority of the Roman soldiers was unquestioned and their liberty to harass the Jews, who often were not Roman citizens, was liberal and widespread. Jesus' words, therefore, were once again shocking as He described a lifestyle for people living in relationship with God and living for God's honor. It sounded unrealistic... as though Jesus was describing a counterculture way to live. Heads were no longer nodding in agreement, now furrowed brows reflected confusion... *what might happen if no one stood up to evil and injustice which was so widespread?*

At first glance it appears Jesus was challenging His followers to NOT stand up for themselves or justice, nor defend those being unfairly treated, nor call out evil and wrong behavior.

That's not simply a 'pacifist' lifestyle, it is a 'disengaged' lifestyle, a survival mentality, which makes no contribution to the betterment of society. Of course, that is NOT the lifestyle Jesus calls us to, is it my friends? As Jesus continued, His words at first only further confused His listeners, but then slowly they began to bring more clarity to His message: **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor but hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** (Matt. 5:43-48)

Perfection in life?! Jesus' listeners wondered then, as we do today... is that even remotely possible? What does being sons and daughters of God really mean and how should that close relationship with God affect our daily lives? What might happen if we really did **'love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.'**? But it's true isn't it friends... sunshine and rain fall on all types of people, and all crop fields and all flowers equally. God provides the essentials for life to all people, regardless of their behavior or their attitudes toward God! And why? *Because God's love for all humans He has created is unconditional, and God's ultimate desire for all people is that everyone shall recognize their need for rescue from their sin bondage and turn to Jesus for deliverance.* (2 Peter 3:9) God wants us to understand: Jesus died on the cross equally for all persons, of all generations, of all ethnicities and all moral condition, for **"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. and are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came through Jesus Christ."** (Romans 3:23,24) *Do you see my friends, Jesus was calling His listeners to begin seeing the world as God sees it... a human race in desperate need for what ONLY Jesus can provide!*

Matthew and the people on that hillside that day remembered back to Jesus' opening words in this 'sermon on the mount': **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** (Matt. 5:6-10)

I wonder if as Matthew deeply reflected on all these very challenging words Jesus had spoken, his mind went to a singular, powerful statement God had made through the prophet Micah, 600 years before: **"God has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD God require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."** (Micah 6:8) *Now that's a cornerstone statement of God upon which we can build our value system, our priorities, our objectives in life as we try to align our lives with the heart of God!* If we filter those "sermon on the mount" words of Jesus through this verse, do you see how God calls us to move away from rigid, legalistic living and learn to live instead as a people of God, led by the Holy Spirit of God, making a difference in this world as we live as "salt and light" in our decaying and darkening world?

A few years later John, another of Jesus' disciples, wrote something very powerful that I think brings further clarity to the shocking words Jesus was speaking on the hillside that day: ***" This is the message we have heard from Jesus and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with God yet we walk in the darkness we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as Jesus is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin."*** (1 John 1:5-7) ***"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness... He walks around in the darkness, he does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded him."*** (1 John 2:9-11)

So, my friends, as you wrestle everyday with the challenge of living a God honoring life of justice, and mercy, and truth and holiness... how do we apply these radical words of Jesus in our lives in an evil world? For me, I've come to these conclusions...

1. *First, the darkness of sin clouds the mind and heart of every living human being.*

For many, they are so deep in the darkness, evil is all they know and to them it is normal. For all of us we desperately need the light of Jesus' truth and His life changing power unleashed in us in order to escape the darkness and begin living as God has designed human life. Short of that experience the darkness will continue to consume me.

2. *Second, I am challenged and empowered by God to live the delicate balance of mercy and grace toward those living in darkness while being God's 'salt and light' in calling them to recognize, respect and desire to live a God honoring life.*

That means I stand for truth, moral righteousness and I do not do anything which joins with or advances the influence of moral darkness in my world. But I also extend mercy and grace to those, whose darkness permeated lives, are so far from what is God honoring living.

Now my friends, these words of Jesus challenge us to look closely at our world and evaluate how we are both being influenced by our dark world, but also to look at what impact we are having on the dark world in which we live. Can you do that? What does Jesus help you see? And what is Jesus challenging you to consider as you seek to live making a difference in this world?

I've found a modern song which calls us to consider the challenge of Jesus' words in making a difference in our very needy world:

Today's Scripture is Matthew 5:38-48.