



THE HEART OF THE MATTER, PT2

As I started preparing for this message, US / Israeli missiles started raining down on military – and civilian – targets in Iran. And in response, Iranian missiles started raining down on US allies in other countries.

Now I'm no fan of the Islamic Republic of Iran: it is an oppressive, corrupt, and anti-Christian regime. But this attack was basically a pre-emptive strike on one nation by far more powerful ones – in the name of defence. Not dissimilar to Putin's rationale for invading Ukraine (and almost certainly a distraction from matters much closer to home).

But it's also a reminder that conflict comes easy to us. Maintaining peace can be hard enough when it comes to family and friends, right? What about enemies? And we all have enemies, yes? Of some kind.

It might be ...

- That kid in your school (or your child's school)
- That colleague, or that boss who's got it in for you
- That neighbour who likes to treat you with contempt
- That family member you wish you could disown

Now this was the situation in 1st century Israel, too, under Roman occupation. And in today's part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us how to do right, not just by those we get on with, but those we don't.

Matthew 5:38-48

OK, so Jesus here locks on to another 2 areas where human beings screw up – and where He calls His followers to be different. Without wishing to sound like a Jane Austen novel, I've titled the points like this:

1) Keep your pride in check. "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth' (Exodus 21:23-25). But I say to you, do not resist an evil person ..."

OK, this 'eye for eye' thing is what's called the law of retaliation. It was a legal principle to ensure punishments stayed proportionate to the crimes. But by Jesus' day it was being used as an excuse for personal vengeance. So, Jesus reestablishes what the *Torah* is actually saying.

But He also shows us a different way of applying it:

- **Turn the other cheek.** A slap to the right cheek, using the back of the hand, was a symbolic way of dominating and humiliating another person. Jesus encourages us to offer the left cheek, too. I.e. demand that they slap you with the palm – and treat you like an equal.
- **Offer them your coat.** In the *Torah*, to take someone's outer garment was forbidden, especially if you were dealing with someone poorer than you. That cloak was their shelter. Jesus here tells His followers to shame their enemies by, well, walking around starkers!
- **Go the extra mile.** A Roman soldier could force you to carry their pack, but only for a mile. Jesus says, "Go 2." That might mean show them what generosity looks like; then again, it might mean land them in trouble with their superiors. I.e. make them regret asking!

Now these examples are all 1st century specific: what's *our* take-home? The point, I think, is to avoid acting out of vengeance – of responding in kind – and to try to overcome by non-violent means: demand respect by *our* behaviour, embarrass our enemies by *their* behaviour –

And basically, kill 'em with kindness.

2) Keep your prejudice in check. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour (Leviticus 19:18), and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: love your enemies ..."

Again, this command to love our neighbours comes straight out of the *Torah*, i.e. it's there in the Bible. But 'hate your enemy' had been added by certain groups in 1st century Israel, groups like the Essenes (they even had a scroll entitled 'the coming war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness'). And the reason is: they'd interpreted 'neighbour' to mean 'friend', not 'enemy.'

Jesus counters this by saying, "But I tell you: love your enemies, too – and pray for those who persecute you."

I.e. your neighbour is everyone:

- **Friend.** And enemy.

- **Insider.** And outsider.
- **Believer.** And not-yet believer.

And why does it matter? Because it's how God sees *us*. He loves human beings, even those who hate Him. Yes, He will judge (though sin often comes with its own consequences, c.f. Romans 1). But generally, God has a long fuse, and His approach to us is a gracious one. And if we're going to claim to be God's children and see other people become the same, they need to see Him in us.

Because, as Jesus says here, if all we do is love those who love us, how are we any different to the Romans? Or to those who work for the Romans? How are we any different to our enemies?

To those who might become *our* friends? And *His*?

Wild Peace

Now this stuff can be misunderstood. So, here's what Jesus *doesn't* mean:

- Staying put in an abusive relationship.
- Keeping silent in the face of wrongdoing.
- Never physically defending someone else.

And here's what He *does* mean:

- Setting the greater example in this situation.
- Making violence a last, uncommon resort.
- Believing in Jesus enough to follow Him.

And just in case anyone wants to suggest this is just my take on these verses, understand this was how early Christians faced up to Roman persecution – and overcame it. And Jesus' instructions have inspired other movements, too. The ending of British rule in India. The Civil Rights movement in the US. The overthrow of Apartheid in S Africa. The Good Friday Agreement in N Ireland. And so on.

Yes, it's a radical way. Or as U2 puts it, quoting poet Yehuda Amichai, a 'wild peace.' But this is God's way.

Which is what Jesus means when He says, "Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now again, you might think, "But that's impossible. We're not perfect." Which is true. But the Greek word *teleioi* really means 'complete.' What Jesus is saying is, "You have to be total in your obedience to God's law. Not just compassionate towards some people, but compassionate to all."

So may we, as Jesus' followers, take the love we have for those nearest us, and widen that circle. Just as Jesus has done to *us*.