

“You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:38-48

Before God called me into full time vocational ministry, I spent about ten years of my life working as a land surveyor. One of the most basic instruments of measurement that surveyors have used throughout history is a level and a corresponding leveling rod, which are used to determine the heights or elevations for maps or blueprints or construction projects. In the work that I did as a Registered Land Surveyor, the heights and elevations that we measured with a level and leveling rod were always based on what is called the *average mean sea level* (AMSL) for that area. And so, what that means for us is that the highest peak, the summit of Mount Arrowsmith is 1,819 meters or 5,968 feet above the average elevation of the sea water in the Alberni Inlet. Well, whenever you tell someone this, the question that is always asked is: “How do you know Mount Arrowsmith is 1,819 meters/5,968 feet above the average sea level? Since the tides continue to go up and down, where do you start to measure that elevation from?”

Well, the answer is, you don’t start by measuring an elevation from the water. You start from what is called a “benchmark” - which is a mark on a permanent object, which is usually a rounded metal object on top of a metal post that is set in concrete deep in the ground. And on the mark on the round metal object, an elevation above the average mean sea level has been established - to be used as an elevation reference point for maps, topographic surveys, tidal observations and road/building construction and measuring how high mountains are. There are about eight different benchmarks in Port Alberni, not too far from the water - and they each vary from 1.6 meters/5 feet to 6.9 meters/23 feet above the established mean average sea level of the Alberni Inlet. It’s from these benchmarks we are able to know the elevation above or below the established mean average sea level of everything in the Alberni Valley.

A benchmark is point of reference, a standard, by which everything around it can be measured. In regards to the height of Mount Arrowsmith, the benchmark is the rounded top of a metal object that is based on the established mean average sea level of the ocean. In regards to what kind of progress we are making in loving God and following Jesus and embracing the transforming work of the Holy Spirit and joyfully submitting to the reign and rule of King Jesus in our hearts – the benchmark, Jesus has been telling us all throughout Matthew 5 - is that of being spiritually-poor; grief-stricken by sin; humbly-dependent; passionately in pursuit of God; merciful; pure-hearted; peace-making; joyfully persecuted; salt and light in the world; committed to the truth of God’s Word; continuously pursuing reconciliation; seeking to be physically, emotionally and spiritually pure; always speaking the truth. These are heart attitudes and resultant behaviors that Jesus spoke of in the first 37 verses of Matthew 5, which are all based on the benchmark, the point of reference, the standard by which all of our Kingdom character and all of our Kingdom conduct is measured, which is - *the perfection of righteousness*. We saw that in Matthew 5:19 when Jesus said: “*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” and in our text for today he declares: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48). What this means is that if we are loving God and following Jesus and embracing the work of the Holy Spirit - *everything* we think, say and do will measure up to the benchmark, the standard of the perfect righteousness of God.

Well, of course, the truth is, that as naturally-born members of the sinful rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden, righteousness that is of God, perfection as God defines it, is truly way impossibly beyond us. Everything we think, say and do is infected and tainted, warped with sin to differing degrees. The bottom-line, constant struggle in life, for Christian and non-Christian, is with internal and external righteousness, Kingdom character and Kingdom conduct. But that's the point Jesus is making when he says, "*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven . . . you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" His point? There is no one on earth who has enough *righteousness* and is *perfect* enough to "*enter the Kingdom of heaven.*"

How can then can we become righteous enough and perfect enough to "*enter the Kingdom of heaven*"? There is only one way - *Jesus* is the *way* we can be *righteousness* enough and *perfect* enough to "*enter the Kingdom of heaven.*" Jesus said: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). In 2 Corinthians 5:20-21 the apostle Paul writes: "*We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" When we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior, he becomes the benchmark, point of reference, the standard of perfect righteousness by which God measures our lives. Colossians 1:19-22 tells us in Jesus "*all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*"

We can know the perfect righteousness of God by joyfully following Jesus. This could easily be the sub-heading for the entire Sermon on the Mount, as Matthew 5-7 is all about how people in the kingdom of God should live out their lives. The first six verses of Matthew 5 had to do with our heart attitude towards God. The second six verses of Matthew 5 had to do with our heart attitude toward others. In Matthew 5:13-48 Jesus speaks of us how we must deal with our heart attitude towards living out the character of the Kingdom that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 5:1-12 - because those who are of the Kingdom of God are not just simply concerned with outward actions and external appearances.

In Matthew 5:13-28 Jesus has been showing us how Kingdom conduct flows out of Kingdom character, in the context of scribes and Pharisees of his day were content with a superficial approach to faith that presented a righteous facade without developing their inward heart of Kingdom character. Jesus has been addressing that issue by framing different areas of our lives within the context of how the scribes and Pharisees would have interpreted the "*law*" as to what proper conduct was acceptable in each circumstance. Jesus begins each area by saying: "You have heard that it was said" emphasizing how the scribes and Pharisees would interpret the "*law*" regarding what area he is going to address – and then Jesus says, "*But I say to you*" - in describing the kingdom character that leads to kingdom conduct. We will see this again in our text for today as Jesus challenges us by looking at how righteous Kingdom character should affect our conduct in how we respond to those hurt, harm, oppose and attack us.

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."

In these words, Jesus turned the Jewish interpretation of God's Words regarding personal justice upside-down. The law of Moses prevented offended people from taking the law into their own hands and seeking private retaliation against an enemy or someone who had harmed them - because it is the natural inclination of fallen people when harmed to want to exact vengeance on the perpetrator.

The standard of such retribution was set out in Leviticus 24:17-20: *“Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.”* The scribes and Pharisees interpreted this to mean that whatever someone does to us, we have the right to do the same back to them. The problem with that kind of thinking though, is that it didn't end there. Because of our fallen nature, when we've been hurt, we want to do more, we want payback *and* the punishment of retaliation and revenge. This is how many people today - even Christians - still deal with people whom they feel have wronged them. But Jesus reminds us here that God never intended His words to be used as a proof-text for retaliation and revenge, but rather as a principle of justice. Yet, even then, Jesus set a different standard, a greater point of reference, a higher benchmark than justice when he said: *“Do not resist the one who is evil.”* The Hebrew word translated *“resist”* in this context means “do not render evil for evil.” And so, Jesus is talking about revenge, not self-preservation. He isn't telling us to be weak and passive; He's telling us *not to be* vindictive. Jesus wants us to ask ourselves the question, “If someone does something evil to me, how may I respond with grace in return?” This flies in the face of the self-centered, rights-oriented, entitlement-minded ethos of our culture. Contrary to popular belief, in Christ, we have no rights. When we come of a living faith in Jesus Christ we become a disciple, which means we have signed up to die to self. In Matthew 16:24-25 Jesus said: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* Kingdom character produces Kingdom sacrifice when wronged or hurt by others. Jesus gives us four examples of what the Kingdom conduct of sacrifice through Kingdom character looks like in this.

“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” This is about being personally insulted. The context here is a slap of the hand on the right cheek that is given by the back of a right hand. In Jesus' day, just a slap to one's face was considered a gross insult by the Jews; it was among the most demeaning acts one could inflict on another person. Slapping someone on the cheek was a sign of contempt and meant that you were scorned as a nothing. In Jesus's day, if a man struck you with the back of his hand instead of punching you in the mouth, you could collect twice the damages because an insult was worse than an injury. But Jesus is telling us that when we are insulted, we are not try to even the score. Those with kingdom character refuse to dispense their own justice. Exodus 14:14 says: *“The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”* Whenever we are insulted and demeaned, we are to turn the other cheek and know that our value and dignity come from God and not from others.

“If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” This is about giving up more than is required of us. Jesus speaks of being sued and taken to court and giving up both your clothes (tunic: a long-sleeved inner robe similar to a nightshirt that a person wore next to the skin) and coat. What is significant here is that while it was possible in Jesus' day to sue others for the very shirt on their backs, but the Old Testament forbade the keeping a person's *“cloak”* because in those days a person's *“cloak”* was also their blanket, which they used for warmth and protection. What Jesus is telling us here is that if someone takes something from us, reverse the dynamic. Instead of defending ourselves or seeking retaliation, we should sacrificially give them more, even something that is a basic necessity of our lives. When our comfort and security is threatened, we are to give away our comfort and security - in knowing that our comfort and security is not in things but in our most sovereign God.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” This is about doing far more that what is demanded of us. In Jesus' day Israel was under the harsh brutal military rule of Rome. Under such conditions, people often found themselves seized by soldiers and forced into service. At such times Jesus tells us we are to serve with an attitude of willingness to go and even beyond what is demanded. A spirit of gracious conduct and cooperation under pressure reveal the kingdom character within us. Those of the Kingdom of God should respond with a humble servant's heart and joyfully go far beyond what is expected of them. We are to give our opponents more than they have the right to demand of us.

“Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” This is about joyfully responding to the needs of others. The Old Testament *“Law”* taught that generous, cheerful giving to those in need was God’s way for His people. But while we are to give freely, we must also give with wisdom. Our giving and borrowing must not be like welfare which does all the work for those who are lacking and robs them of their dignity and incentive. In the Old Testament the poor were provided for by their own gleaning from the fields. This is not a command to give to everybody who asks whatever they desire. We must give those in need what they need the most, providing for their bodies and their souls. Kingdom character gives and borrows freely with God’s grace and God’s wisdom. When we are asked to surrender our time, finances or property - we are to be a joyfully generous, giving people because we are a people who belong to a joyful, generous, giving God. Kingdom character produces Kingdom sacrifices in our hearts and lives when wronged and when people are in need.

“You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus ends this section of his sermon by quoting a teaching and belief of his day that had no support in the Scriptures at all: *“You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”* This statement most likely came about as the scribes and Pharisees proof-texted verses from the Old Testament to support their hatred of the Gentiles. If you were looking for it, it was all there: God ordered Israel to kill all the Canaanites; the Psalmist prayed for the downfall of the wicked, who were his enemies; God brought death and destruction to the Egyptians at the Exodus. But the problem with the scribes and Pharisees picking and choosing biblical texts to support their position of prejudice was - they passed over all the texts that instructed them to show kindness toward foreigners, neighbors and even to their enemies (Exodus 23:4-5; Leviticus 19:17-18; Proverbs 25:21-22). The truth is, we as fallen humanity, tend to respond best toward our own kind. Jews love Jews and Gentiles love Gentiles and we love the people who love us. But Jesus tells us we must reflect our Father’s love toward *everyone* – even our enemies. Instead of retaliating, instead of rejecting, instead of hating those who oppose us or hurt us or are different than us, Jesus tells us we are to pray for them and do them good, just as the Father does to us.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” These three verses reflect key elements of the character of the Kingdom we have already looked at.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” In Matthew 5:23-26 we learned that murder at the level of the heart in anger, insult and a judgmental spirit is rooted our lack of love for God. The Bible tells us that the greatest commandment in the Kingdom of God is about *love relationships* - and that our love for God and our love for each other and all others is reciprocal. When we love God, we *will* love each other and others, because of God’s love for us. The apostle John affirms that in 1 John 4:19-21: *“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”* What this means is that we cannot love God in isolation from all other relationships in life. Our love for God is our heart commitment to God that is expressed in all our conduct and relationships – even those who oppose and attack us. But this is not something we naturally do; pride, anger, bitterness and pain are barriers to this. But we can love our enemies because God loves us – and because God never commands us to do anything without giving us the power to do. In Luke 6:27-28 Jesus said: *“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”*

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:14-21

*"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." In Matthew 5:9 Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." The phrase "sons of God" is a bestowed title indicating a special family relationship. The promised blessing of being a "peacemaker" is that we will be called, named, recognized, designated as a true son/daughter of God. As children on earth resemble their parents, *we are never more like God than when we are making peace as Jesus made peace.* "Sons of God" seek to make peace that is grounded in the cross of Christ. It is the family resemblance of making peace that marks us as sons/daughters of the Father. Whenever we make peace by bringing people – and that includes even those who oppose us - into a relationship with ourselves or with others or with God, we look more and more like God.*

"For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." In common grace, God gives the blessings sun and rain to all men and women without distinction. In the face of unrighteousness, those of the Kingdom of God exhibit righteousness that is of God. But even God is merciful to the unrighteous. We are to be so too. Jesus tells us those with Kingdom character will obediently respond with love, mercy, grace and forgiveness towards those who offend and attack.

*"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Our kingdom conduct should be reflective of our kingdom character. We "must be perfect, as" our "heavenly Father is perfect" - in that as the Bible, the Word of God, is a reflection of God Himself – God has made His will and His character known to His people. *What that means is that when followers of Jesus Christ seek to live in conformity to Scripture, they are in fact pursuing the very perfection of God in their souls.* Jesus' perfect obedience, his fulfillment of the Scriptures cost him his life. And Jesus tells us that when we deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus down that path of Jesus' perfect obedience – we will also lose our lives as the world defines life - but we will find ourselves living out our lives in the "kingdom of God/heaven" with Jesus. Just as children on earth resemble their parents, *we are never more like God than when we obey the Word of God like Jesus and love others as Jesus sacrificially loved us.**

We have spent the last 14 weeks together walking through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. During that time God has been speaking to our hearts, while the Holy Spirit has guided our souls down the path of perfect righteousness, the path that leads to the Kingdom of God where Kingdom character produces Kingdom conduct, so that we might measure up to the standard, the point of reference, the benchmark of our faith – *which is Jesus.* "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." As I studied and wrote this message over the last couple of days, I found myself constantly casting myself on the mercy of God. The only reasonable response I can think of in response to our Jesus' words here is to totally surrender and fully submit ourselves to His Lordship and rely on his grace to work deep in our hearts, to do what we cannot do ourselves. The righteousness and the perfection that leads to the kingdom of God/heaven that Jesus has been talking about over the past 14 weeks -- is a righteousness and perfection of the heart that goes far beyond our understanding. In one sense I think Jesus' intent throughout the Sermon on the Mount is to proclaim our inability to interpret what might lead us into a righteousness and perfection of the kingdom of God - so that we might be absolutely stunned and overwhelmed by the nature of what it means to follow our Lord Jesus into the kingdom of God.

Twelve years ago Nancy, Micah and I spent two weeks in a cabin in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains about ten miles outside of Westcliffe, Colorado. Almost every morning, after reading my Bible for an hour or two, I would take my daily hike a couple miles up the side of a mountain to a spot to a place at about 7,000 feet in elevation that overlooked the valley with an absolutely breathtaking view. To my back stood the Sangre de Cristo Mountains with 13 peaks over 13,000 feet and nine peaks over 14,000 feet in height; straight out in front of me 20 miles away were the eastern Rocky Mountains; to my left 75 miles away stood Pikes Peak; and to my right 60 miles away in the other direction stood the San Juan Mountains of New Mexico. With the sun in mid sky over the mountains in front of me every morning I just sat before God and prayed, overwhelmed by the creative magnificence and awesome beauty before me. Clearly I was insignificant here; and God was everything – which is the way it always is, isn't it? Yet I was stunned by the reality that it was this same God who loved me and saved me in spite of my utter depravity and the inability of my fallen sinful heart to intimately know Him through Jesus Christ. It is at such points of deep inadequacy in life that the Holy Spirit will meet you and rest on you.

Augustine once prayed to God: “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you.” Richard Wurmbrand wrote of God: “I will never be satisfied with glimpses, with possibilities and probabilities of truth. I must know Him.” That is the call of my heart in these days; I pray it is for you also. The deepest desire of my life is to know God and follow Jesus and surrender to the Holy Spirit. But the path of getting there begins by recognizing that the fallen self, apart from God, is imprisoned by sin. Only an encounter with the living presence of God can satisfy our deeper hungers because He is the One who planted the urge and long for Himself in our hearts. The only pure hearts we will ever know here on earth will be shadows we see through the fallen nature of our character - because it is then we finally become fully aware of how absolutely and totally dependent we are upon God's graceful intervention.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” Nowhere is that more true than when we consider what Jesus told us what he expects from those who follow him in the Sermon on the Mount. The problem we all face is hearing Jesus demand we “*must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” is that we most often try to do so on our own through the sinful, fallen, fragile, chipped, cracked, mundane, earthen vessels which we call our lives. The truth be told, we are much more prone to carry trash than treasure in our hearts. Yet 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 tells us, “*For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*”

Jesus tells us that the standard by which Kingdom character and Kingdom conduct is measured, is *the perfection of righteousness*. What that means is that everything we think, say and do must measure up to the benchmark, the standard of the perfect righteousness of God. That point of reference is way beyond us. But Jesus also told us that when we truly surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior, he becomes the benchmark, the point of reference, the standard of perfect righteousness by which God measures our lives. When we seek to live in conformity with the Word of God, we are pursuing the very perfection of God in our souls. We can know the perfect righteousness of God by joyfully following Jesus - *because we are never more like God than when we obey the Word of God like Jesus and love others as Jesus sacrificially loved us*. In Ephesians 3:20-21 the apostle Paul proclaims: “*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*”

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