

“The Heart of the Matter: Servant Love”

Introduction: At the table where we have just shared, we have celebrated the remarkable servant love that God, through his Son, has offered to us, healing our wounds through his. As Peter describes it, Jesus suffered both physically and emotionally, on the cross, but he neither retaliated against nor threatened his persecutors. Tucked away in these words of Peter is the most extraordinary bit of instruction, one that we might be inclined to read over or quickly by, hoping it doesn't see us. Peter says: “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.” This same bit of instruction is provided by Jesus himself in the SM, and is much harder to ignore as he declares it loudly and boldly: “Do not resist an evil person; love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you.”

What's this all about? What kind of wimps is Jesus producing, it is sometimes asked. This is asked because these words of Jesus stand in stark opposition to how life is typically lived within the kingdom of this world. There, the dominant narrative is to gain power, to amass wealth, to assert your rights, and if someone hits you, to hit back harder. That's how you show strength.

Well, far from producing wimps, Jesus is seeking to show us where true strength lies. He is speaking, as Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, with the wisdom of the cross and wants to reveal that there is a better way, a way other than revenge or hatred, to respond to those who've hurt us. The truly strongest response, the heart of the matter to which Jesus goes, is that of servant love, identifying ways to provide for the good of another, even and especially an enemy. A number of questions emerge: Why should we do this? What might doing this look like? How is it even possible to do this?! To explore these questions, I want to work our way backwards through these verses, beginning with “why?”

I. Why should we love our enemy? (vv. 43-48)

A. Put simply, we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because we are called, as followers of Jesus, to reveal the character of God and the reality of his kingdom to a broken and needy world. We do so by being a community that is free, as we have seen so far, of anger, lust, unfaithfulness, and falsehood. To these Jesus now adds freedom from revenge and hatred. It is certainly true that revenge and hatred never solve anything; they only multiply the violence. But the primary reason we are to eliminate those things from our lives is that Jesus has now brought us into a new family, the family of God. As such, we are to take on in increasing measure the family likeness, using the perfect love of our heavenly Father as our goal.

B. As Jesus puts it, anyone can love those who love them, and most everyone loves those who are pretty much like them. In fact, this is how the Law of Moses seemed to put it: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv. 19:18). The key phrase here was “among your people.” The assumption was that if a person was from another group or tribe or nation and stood in opposition to you in some way that you were free to hate them.:

Illustration: I was thinking about this when I heard on the news that the new Red Sox catcher had been voted by an anonymous poll of fellow players to be one of the most despicable players in the league. But now that he's on their team, the Sox players all declare that they love him and are looking forward to playing with him! The hatred has disappeared now that they're all wearing the same uniform. We could of course extend this illustration to the more serious forms of hatred and

violence that are present between different groups of people, how hard it is to love those from members of different races or political parties in America, or those who are from different tribes in Africa, or those who are of different religions in the Middle East, or those from the west and the east of Ukraine, or even, dare I say it, between those who live in town here and those who have a home out at Conomo Point! If we are to love those from among our people, we can then hate the “other” in this case, right?

Wrong, says Jesus. We are to especially love the “other” because that is the way the character of the King and the reality of his kingdom is going to be revealed. So how can I serve others to show them that there is a better way, a way other than revenge and hatred? What might such servant love look like?

II. What does servant love look like? (vv. 38-42)

A. Jesus gives us four sketches or illustrations of the possibilities. He introduces these four by contrasting them with the eye for an eye tooth for a tooth kind of response that most were living by. This directive appears several times in the OT, and it should be noted that it was designed to be restrictive in nature, to restrain retaliation from getting out of hand. That is, if a neighbor killed your chicken, you did not have the right to kill his chicken and his cow, which was pretty much how tribes operated. Instead, in general, the judges of the day would levy a financial assessment to be paid according to the value of your chicken. The problem was that this restriction became a license for revenge and personal vendettas, which of course led to bitterness and hatred. What was intended to be restraining ended up being retributive.

B. Jesus declares that this is not the way to live an abundant life, or to reveal the kingdom of God or the character of the King. To highlight this, he gives four concrete examples of non-retaliation, four pictures of how to think about responding to loss, for ways to offer servant love to those who have wronged us in some way. Importantly, these are not new laws. Rather, they are to highlight a new attitude, a righteousness that grows from the inside-out. So, if anyone injures your pride by striking you, think about letting them strike you again. If anyone takes you to court and sues for damages, think about giving them even more. If anyone forces you to carry something a mile, as a Roman soldier could do, think about carrying it further. If anyone wants to borrow from you (and may not be able to pay you back), think about lending to them anyway. Each of these examples comes from the daily life and experience of those who were listening to Jesus. They picture an offended party seeking not to get even, but the good of the offender, seeking, really, to woo the offender into the orbit of the Father’s love.

C. Of course, there will be times when we need to protect ourselves in various ways. Jesus wouldn’t want a woman to stand and take repeated physical abuse from her husband. One who drives intoxicated on a highway needs to lose their license. The snowboarder who cuts the legs out from another skier needs to be disciplined. For these things, God, Paul says in Romans 13, has provided a governing authority. There is a police force and a ski patrol to assure that things don’t get out of hand. At the same time, we need to feel the tension here and be careful not to try and water down the illustrations Jesus gives us with the dozens of qualifications that might be popping into our minds. At the very least, they lead us to always question our motivation – is it revenge we have in mind, or the good of the one who has offended us? In our interpersonal relationships, what response of ours will best reveal the character of the King and the reality of his kingdom? What will woo an offender to seek the Father’s grace?

III. How is servant love possible? (1 Peter 2:23)

A. If, then, these illustrations are pictures of the abundant life in the kingdom of God, how does our heart get there? How is servant love possible for us to offer? It begins when we recognize that we, too, at one time, were an enemy, an enemy of God, one who was opposed to him and perhaps even hostile to him and his purposes. But Paul explains the change that happens in this way [Romans 5:10; 12:17-21]:

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son...(therefore) Do not repay anyone evil for evil...If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone...Do not take revenge, my dear friends but leave room for God's wrath...On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

If, in other words, God has given his life for you through the servant love of his Son, while you were hostile to him, there is no room for you not to seek to love and serve those who are being hostile to you, no matter who they are.

B. Then, our heart gets there as we recognize that what Jesus brings is not good advice but good news. Yes, what he teaches is good advice for living well. But if it's only good advice, then it will weigh us down with the impossibility of its demands. "Eliminate anger and lust, be always faithful and true to my word, avoid revenge and love my enemy, be perfect as the Father is perfect?" That leaves me gasping for breath and wanting to throw up my hands in despair at the enormity of it all. But Jesus doesn't stop at advice; he continues on to news, good news, news that begins with revealing that my identity comes not from what I do but from what the King has done for me. It's news that reveals that not only does the King have the power to tell me how to live but has given me the power that will enable me to live. It's news that reveals that while I work out my salvation, God is also already at work in me. It's news that reveals that I am one in whom the King dwells and that I already dwell within his kingdom.

How can I love my enemy? Like Jesus, by entrusting myself and my needs and even my sense of justice into the Father's hands. If I know my standing is in Christ, then I can know that he will give me the power and grace I need to offer servant love to those who oppose me, as counter-cultural as it may seem. If my wounds have been healed by him, then he, living in me, will enable my heart to be formed like his, in order to offer that healing he brings to others. May God give us grace so to do.