

Cultivating Life Testimony: thank you Selina. Since September, as a church community, we have committed to cultivating life with Christ together. We've committed to engaging in spiritual practices, things like prayer, bible reading, solitude, and fasting for the purpose of opening ourselves to God. I want to encourage you to keep at it. Relationship building requires time spent, speaking things out, learning to listen--our relationship with God is no different.

Just a few moments ago Dayna was singing, "*pull me a little closer, take me a little deeper, I want to know your heart;*" this is what we are seeking through these spiritual practices--to know Jesus more deeply.

I know that solitude can be a little daunting for some of us. We really want to grow in relationship with God but we don't know where to start, what to do, or what to say. I am going to be leading one-day-retreat at Twin Creeks Retreat Center in Abbotsford; it will begin on Friday, March 7th at 6pm, and we will wrap up on Saturday, March 8th at 3pm.

If you come, I can promise that you will be given some tools and spiritual practices that will enable you to connect with God, both at the Retreat, and in the middle of your regular rhythms. This Retreat might be one of the most significant investments you make all year. Let me encourage you to sign up before February 25th--you can sign up online or call the church office--space is limited.

Intro: Last Sunday, we re-entered our series on Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*--I'm grateful to Craig Erickson for coming to preach it to us from memory. It was powerful wasn't it?

I wonder, after Jesus first preached His *Sermon*, did anyone come up to Him and say, "*Nice sermon Pastor?*" I highly doubt it. Jesus' *Sermon* may be a lot of things but "nice" isn't one of them. Jesus' words are both light and flame--His words illuminate; His words burn.¹ His *Sermon* is counter-cultural and evocative--it makes demands and invites response.

In this *Sermon*, Jesus talks about the things that we chase after: money, success, sex, and relationships--He goes beneath what lies on the surface and addresses the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. This morning I want to invite you to hear Jesus' *Sermon* as an invitation into life, the life that God blesses.

illus: As I begin, I want to tell you Lionel and Helen's story--these dear people were a part of the congregation I pastored in Calgary. Lionel and Helen were in their mid to late 50's when it happened--when Lionel's mother was murdered. His mother was in her 80's, she lived alone, she had no reason to suspect that her life was in danger. But one night a burglar broke into her home, planning to steal what was of value, and make a quick escape.

Lionel's mom was awakened that night by noises, she wandered from her room in search of the sound and discovered that she was not alone--you know the rest; Lionel's mother was killed. Try to imagine what it must have been like to receive the phone call:

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7*, 11.

“Mr. Liebrecht, this is the police calling--there’s been a break-in at your mother’s home.” “What? A break in? What did they take? Where is my mother? Is she all right?” Complete silence. “Mr. Liebrecht I’m sorry to tell you that there are signs of a struggle; your mother has been killed. We are doing everything we can to locate her killer.”

The police did their work exceptionally well; the killer was found, arrested, and brought to trial. Lionel and Helen lived through it all--they sat in the court room, watching, listening, as the killer was convicted and sentenced to prison. But that’s not the end of the story--it’s just the beginning. Not long after, Lionel and Helen visited this man in prison. They told him that they forgave him, that they were praying for Him, that because of the strong love of Jesus, they loved him.

It wasn’t a one-time visit. They continued to come, to bring gifts, to talk with him and pray for him. I wonder, if someone were to ask this convicted killer what Christians are really like, what words would he choose? Legalistic, intolerant, and judgmental? I think not. I suspect the first word that would come to mind is *loving*. *Christians love their enemies, they forgive those who have done them harm, they love even when it costs them--this is the way of Jesus.* And so it is.

Let me encourage you to open your Bibles to Matthew 5:38-48, page 1503 in the Blue Bible; let’s read what Jesus has to say about evil, enemies, and love.

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ **39** But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. **40** And if

*anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. **41** If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. **42** Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **46** If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? **47** And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus *Sermon* may be many things but “nice” isn’t one of them. Jesus’ teaching goes against our understanding of personal rights, self-preservation, and justice. Nowhere is Jesus’ *Sermon* more radical than here, and nowhere does it hold more potential for revolution than here, talking about evil, enemies, and love.

At the risk of confusing everyone, I want to begin where Jesus ends--with His notion of perfection--because all that Jesus says about evil and enemies only makes sense in light of the cross. *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

What comes to mind when you hear the word “perfect”? Without error, stain, or blemish. We may speak of the perfect night, the perfect meal, or the perfect couple. Complete, whole, fully developed, mature--this is what the Biblical authors had in mind when they used the word “perfect”. But there’s one little word in

Jesus' phrase that we need to pay attention to; we miss His meaning if we neglect the word "as".

"Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect." Here's my paraphrase of what Jesus is saying: *I'm asking you to be perfect in love, to set your sights on your heavenly Father whose love is perfect. Don't you see? The Father loves both those who embrace Him and those who reject Him; He sends the sun and rain on both without bias. So enough talk about who's your neighbour and who's your enemy...love both generously, just as the Father loves you.*

The life Jesus lived was the application of His *Sermon*. During Jesus' trial, his cheek was slapped and He turned the other cheek--He didn't trade in insults or retribution (Mt. 26:67). Jesus wasn't sued for His coat but He knew the pain of injustice--He was accused, tried, and condemned--His clothes were stripped from His body and gambled for, beneath the very cross He was crucified on (Mt 27:35).

Jesus was forced by Roman soldiers to carry His cross through Jerusalem's streets; how many miles did He walk before collapsing (Jn 19:17; Mt 27:32)? And yet, in all of this, love for enemies was never far from Jesus' actions or from His lips. With His dying breath He prayed for His executioners saying, *"Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."* (Lk 23:34)

At the centre of Jesus' kingdom ethic, His way of being, is love. When asked to summarize the good life, the life that pleases God, Jesus responded saying *"Love God first, most, and best--love Him with all your heart, your mind, and your strength; don't hold anything back. And don't forget to love others too--love them as much and as well as you love yourself."*

What was happening at the cross? Jesus was demonstrating God's sacrificial love. He was taking upon Himself the evil, rejection, rebellion, hatred, abuse, and violence of humanity--this is the weight He bore at the cross. What Jesus suffered on the cross, He suffered because of us; He suffered instead of us. His generous sacrifice flowed from His generous love--a love that is undeserved and unearned.

Our forgiveness was purchased at the cross; our adoption was paid for through His death. Let me tell you, Jesus knows all about evil and enemies--He's the leading expert on the subject. The way Jesus lived charts the path for the life lived in Jesus' name--*do not resist an evil person; love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; love without bias, love completely, just as the Father has loved you.*

Jesus *Sermon* demands more of me than I am able to give. Left to myself, I am both unwilling and unable to live in love towards my enemies. The life Jesus calls us to is a supernatural life, that requires a supernatural God, to live out this supernatural love. We all need God to live God's way. Apart from God's love, love for enemies will never be more than a noble idea.

Have you experienced God's love? Do you know the joy of being adopted into His family? There is a place for you in God's family, a place to belong, a place where you are accepted, not because of your performance, but because of Jesus' sacrificial love. Romans 8 tells us that once we are grafted into God's family, His love for us is unbreakable.

Eugene Peterson writes, "I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high

or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus...has embraced us.”²

This kind of love has a way of changing a person, from the inside out. *Is it changing you? Will you let it?*

Jesus envisioned God’s kingdom, breaking into our world, exposing the washed out strategies of hatred and revenge, and colouring in for us the way of love. In this section of His *Sermon*, Jesus answers two questions with regard to loving enemies: (1) why do we love our enemies?; and, (2) how? If you are anything like me, you’d probably prefer that Jesus stick to answering your “what about?” questions.

- *but what about the person who hurt me deeply?* Does Jesus want me to love her? *Yes.*
- *what about the person who lied to my face, who intentionally deceive me to their own gain?* Does Jesus want me to love him? *Yes.*
- *what about the person who insulted me, ignored me, rejected me, sued me, dishonoured me, stole from me, divorced me, destroyed me?* What about the person who killed my mother? Does Jesus want me to love them? *Yes.*

The question is, why? Why does God ask us to love in the face of evil and enemies? Look only to the face of Jesus, see how He loved His enemies, see that you and I were once included among those who opposed Him.

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Romans 8:38-39.

³ Peterson, *The Message*, 2 Corinthians 5:21.

God has given each one of us a fresh start by offering forgiveness for sin. Peterson writes, “God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.”³ He asks of us, what He has first offered to us, so that others might be drawn into his generous love.

video clip: It’s hard to describe this kind of love, but we all know when we’ve encountered it. I want to show you a clip from taken from a cinematic rendering of Victor Hugo’s, *Les Miserable*. Hugo’s book tells the story of Jean Valjean, a convict who escapes from jail. In this clip, Valjean has been taken in by a Christian Bishop, but decides to take advantage of his host; let’s see what happens. **(2 min, 48 sec)**

E. Stanley Jones, missionary to India, once wrote “Grace is free, but once you take it you are bound forever to the Giver, and bound to catch the Spirit of the Giver. Like produces like, Grace makes you gracious, the Giver makes you give.”

In the time remaining, I want to address the question of “*how?*” How do we *love* in the face of evil and enemies? How did Jesus? Let me offer three suggestions:

1. Receive the generous love of the Father. Jesus lived from a vast reservoir of the Father’s love; it was the reason that He was able to love in the face of evil and enemies. This cannot be overstated--apart from an ongoing filling of the Father’s love, you likely won’t have

enough resources to love the people you already like--your friends, your spouse, your kids--let alone, love your enemies. Unless you are swimming in the ocean of the Father's love, you will have more luck trying to squeeze blood from a rock; enemy-love flows from the Father's love.

How do we experience this love? It's something real, something we can encounter. It's something He gives. It's something we believe whether we feel it or not. It's something we cultivate, through time spent in His presence. It's something we seek. If you desire to grow in God, we would love to pray with you after the service and ask Him to lead you into a greater encounter of His love. Loving our enemies begins with receiving the generous love of the Father.

But, second, it requires naming your enemies and your wounds before God.

2. Name your enemies and your wounds before God.

We all have enemies, though most of us are too "sophisticated" to refer to them in this way. If you ever fantasize about cutting someone down to size with your words--you've got an enemy. If you've ever wanted someone to "get what they deserve"--you've got an enemy. If you've ever went out of your way to prevent someone from getting something good, something they want--you've got an enemy.

Enemies come in all shapes and sizes: bullies in our classrooms, a mother or father that rejected us, a so-called "friend" that spread rumours about us, a co-worker that insulted us, a spouse that ignores us--who are the enemies in your life? We cannot love our enemies until we name them, and we will not move towards them in love until

we invite Jesus to heal the wounds they have inflicted. There is something profound about the saying, "*hurt people, hurt people.*"

If you're not sure who your enemies are, pull at the thread of your woundedness--pay attention to the wounds you rehearse and you will find your enemies soon enough. Begin to release both enemies and wounds to Jesus, and then, third,

3. Begin to treat your enemies like friends.

Jesus gives us some practical examples in His *Sermon*--look at verses 39-42. "*do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*"

I don't want to be simplistic about how we apply Jesus' words--both love and wisdom are required. Jesus said "*do not resist an evil person,*" but this cannot be a blanket statement covering all instances. He doesn't mean that parents should turn a blind eye to evil in their children, or that church leaders should sweep evil under the carpet.

Jesus said to "turn the other cheek, but He didn't say that we are to stand idly by while violence is being done to others. Should we not come to the aid of Kosovo or Darfur? Should we not stand against those who traffic in women and children? To do nothing would be evil itself.

Jesus said we are to give to the one who asks, but He didn't say we are to give whatever they ask for. What if they ask for something that will harm them, or others? What if they ask for something God's means for me to protect? What if they ask for something that isn't mine to give?

Jesus' four examples come from His 1st century world.

- *the slap on the right cheek* was a backhanded slap, a sign of contempt, an insult. Jesus invites us to treat our enemy like a neighbour--let it go, don't get even, don't try to have the last word. Have you experienced insult from an enemy? What might it look like to treat an insulting enemy like a friend?
- *if anyone forces you to go one mile*: a Roman soldier was within his rights to force a Jew to aid them in their work. Jesus invites the forced labourer to go beyond what was demanded, to showcase loving generosity. Have you ever been forced into shouldering your enemy's burden? How might you give more than is expected?
- *give to the one who asks*: Jesus is subverting the notion of "mine" in a radical way.

Scot McKnight writes, "Enemy love is not a magic formula. It's not a trick. It's a posture towards every human being we meet. We are challenged...to discern who...we treat as enemies--those we claim to love but don't, those who never sit at the table with us, those we label...and to convert enemies into [friends]...by extending in concrete actions the love of God for all to others. We need to ask who

our enemies are and get busy converting them into our [friends]. We will discover God is already there."⁴

Pray

⁴ Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Sermon On The Mount*, 150.