

Traits of Kingdom Living: Radical Love
Matthew 5:21-24, 38-48
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February 11, 2024
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The past two weeks we have asked two questions about the Kingdom of God: first we asked, what is the kingdom of God and last week we asked, how does one enter God's kingdom?

Today we pose two additional questions which we'll spend the next several weeks examining. These two questions, "what is the good life?" and "who is a truly good person?" are questions that have been asked for centuries, in every age down the millennia. They are, in essence, existential questions because they go to the very heart of what it means to be human. For 2000 years, Christians have said that Jesus Christ gave us the most profound, most complete, most accurate answer to these questions that has ever been given. And, I hope it will come as no surprise after the last two weeks that Jesus' short answer to these questions is directly related to the kingdom of God. What is the good life? The good life is the kingdom life, Jesus says. And who is a truly good person? The good person is the person who has entered and is now living the kingdom life.

Sounds straightforward enough. But, as we quickly discover in today's scripture passage, unpacking these truths and living them—walking the talk—is not at all simple or easy, and it takes a lifetime for us to grow into the kind of people Jesus is describing. As we look at these two questions, let's start with a little context.

As you know, this text in Matthew 5 is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching and preaching masterpiece. In it Jesus uses a number of different techniques to communicate truths about life in the kingdom. Beatitudes, short sayings, metaphors, and even a prayer suitable for rote memorization are all part of his teaching arsenal. In the section we're focusing on today Jesus delivers what are often called the six antitheses, or the six oppositions. This is a teaching tool that lays out two opposing ideas using a particular formula: the first part of the antithesis, "you have heard it said," is followed by a commandment or a teaching from the Mosaic Law before introducing a new and contrasting idea with the phrase, "but I tell you." As we read, the first antithesis is, "You have heard that it was said, do not murder." That, of course, is one of the 10 commandments from

the Mosaic Law. But Jesus follows that by saying, “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”

What Jesus is doing in each of the 6 antitheses is to state the letter of the law but then to say that in the kingdom, keeping the letter of the law is not what life is about. In the kingdom, the good life is marked not by keeping the letter of the law but by going beyond the letter to the *spirit* of the law, which not accidentally, also means that we move beyond outward conformity to the “rules” and focus on the inward reality of the heart.

These 6 antitheses should not be construed as an attempt by Jesus to undermine the law. The law was and is a gift from God. But remember that the Mosaic Law was introduced at a time in the ancient world when society was based on survival by raw power. It was a “winner takes all” existence where brute force knew no bounds. Into this “survival of the fittest” environment, the Mosaic Law set limits on the legal revenge that could be exacted as a way of setting things right and meting out justice. The law prohibited the strong from retaliating against the weak with every ounce of destruction they could muster. Instead, the law said, let the response be measured and commiserate with the offense: an eye for an eye and *only* an eye; a tooth for a tooth, but *only* a tooth. (Long, p. 62)

Seen in that light, the OT law set human society on a trajectory of moderation in how neighbor was to treat neighbor, and in that context, it was a significant step in the right direction. But, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is identifying a kingdom that isn’t going to stop where the law did. Limiting ourselves to “an eye for an eye” doesn’t get to the heart of the law which Jesus says is “Do not resist the evildoer at all.” In the kingdom we can’t pat ourselves on the back even if we check all the boxes that the law requires. Instead, Jesus says that *love* is the new yardstick by which we are to measure our attitudes and actions.

Probably every one of us can say that we have not murdered anyone which means that by the standard of the law, we’re fine, upstanding, righteous citizens. We’re feeling good about ourselves right about now. But how many of us can say we have not been angry with someone? That we haven’t held on to resentments or hurts or wounds of the past? That we haven’t indulged our sense of righteous indignation, or felt entitled to spew our angry frustrations? How many of us can say we always hold our tongues so that we don’t speak in anger? What we might feel pretty smug about under the law doesn’t even get us to first base when judged by the new life Jesus is talking about. The law was a minimum requirement, of sorts. The minimum requirement is that we don’t physically take life from another

human being. But the heart of the law which is to shape life in God's kingdom takes us further and challenges us to so love others that we will be concerned for the impact on their life if we allow our anger to go unbridled and unresolved.

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy* author Dallas Willard gives one of the most comprehensive and convicting treatments of anger from a theological perspective that I've ever read. Dr. Willard says that "when we trace wrongdoing back to its roots in the human heart, we find that in the overwhelming number of cases it involves some form of anger followed closely by anger's twin brother, contempt. It is the elimination of anger and contempt that Jesus presents as the first and fundamental step toward the rightness of the kingdom heart. To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil." p. 147, 150

Dr. Willard goes on to make the point that even apart from acting out our anger, "anger is in its own right an injury to others. When I discover your anger at me, I am *already* wounded... It always hurts us when someone is angry at us because some degree of malice is contained in anger." (p. 148) Sadly, anger and contempt are so common in our families and in our culture that we have become largely deaf and blind to it. We no longer recognize how out of place it is or the serious damage we do to one another in our anger. We fail to make the connection between our act of cutting someone off in traffic or yelling at our spouse or children or our angry rudeness to the sales clerk who doesn't handle our transaction as fast as we'd like to the evil that spills over into road rage or our destructive public discourse or in its most extreme, even murder. But they all share the same root of anger and contempt.

What is the good life? And who is the truly good person? The good person is the one who chooses to respond in radical love even to an enemy or someone who has wronged me, because I am more concerned about what my anger will do to them than I am about their wrongdoing against me. That is the kind of love that Jesus says is to be the norm state of kingdom citizens, and when we're free to respond like that, we are free to enjoy the abundance of the good life that the kingdom offers.

I said at the beginning that there is nothing simple or easy about walking the talk, about living the kingdom life as Jesus taught it in the Sermon on the Mount. I want to mention three reactions to the hard truths of kingdom life that I think are pretty typical and also very instructive:

1. “That’s impossible. What Jesus is describing is totally unrealistic and there’s no way I can ever do that.” And you’re absolutely right. It is impossible. It is completely beyond our ability to live with kingdom love if we view what Jesus says as more rungs on the “goodness ladder” that we must climb to measure up. Remember what we said last week: being reborn spiritually is a gift. It’s something God does in us. We cannot do it for ourselves. We will never on our own be able to deal with our anger. We will not be able, through sheer willpower and effort, to respond to people who hurt us with love instead of resentment and malice. To be the kind of person who can do that, we have to open ourselves to the work of God’s Spirit, to yield and give up control, to give up our right to defend, to be right all the time, to retaliate and have the last word. Life in the kingdom marked by radical love can only be lived in total dependence and trust in God. The truly good person invites the kind of transformation that changes anger into love and the good life is the life that results when God is turning us into the kind of people who don’t react in anger.

2. “This is radical, counter-intuitive, non-rational, and counter-cultural”. Yes, yes, yes, and yes. And that’s also why it’s so powerful. The norm in our world is for anger to beget more anger, for violence to be met with more violence. It’s a never-ending cycle of escalation. And it doesn’t solve anything. From peace in the Middle East to the animosity and hatred between rival gangs to the long-running feud in your own family, self-righteousness and anger only add fuel to the fire. But kingdom love halts the cycle by asking us to see things from the perspective of the other person or party or tribe, even if they are an enemy or if they have hurt you. It is counter-intuitive to respond to anger, violence, and evil with good, but it is also the only response that robs violent and oppressive people of their power. People may choose to act with cruelty and violence but they do not have the power to take away the dignity and humanity of other people unless we become just like them in how we respond. The kingdom is at hand when we bless and forgive those who mean to do us harm.

3. “Jesus is an idealist. This will never work in the real world, in the life I have to live with the people I have to deal with. I’ll just get run over.” Is that what Jesus is advocating? Jesus’ listeners in the first century were no less shocked by what he said than we are today. What Jesus was proposing was outrageous, even preposterous. The people he was addressing were under Roman occupation. Times were troubled and hard, and this was no time to appear weak or vulnerable. And, indeed, Jesus is not advocating that we be victims. It’s not a matter of, “You hit me once, please hit me again.” He’s not suggesting we put ourselves in harm’s

way, ignoring healthy and appropriate boundaries. He is, however, challenging us to rethink our response to anger, evil, and violence.

Every time we respond in love rather than react in anger we are living the kingdom life now and the kingdom comes in greater fullness in our present life and world. It's convenient to write Jesus off as too idealistic or too irrational or just plain impossible, because that get us off the hook of doing the hard work of being kingdom people. Religious people have found all sorts of clever and spiritual sounding ways to water down what Jesus is saying. But that's a temptation we must resist. The kingdom is not a "bless me" club. It makes real claims upon our lives because Jesus came not to be our buddy but to be our lord, and as lord he invites us to live like he lived—not in a legalistic, let me add more stuff for you to try to do kind of way. As we've already seen, we can't try our way into the kingdom. Instead, what Jesus is offering us the good life—and it's the real deal, not the counterfeit we get so easily enamored with.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus paints a picture of a kingdom that won't look "responsible" or "normal" to the typical way of seeing. In this kingdom people will go the second mile and will do it willingly and cheerfully. In this kingdom men and women will sell their possessions and give away money that they could keep for themselves in order to provide for the needs of complete strangers. In this kingdom those who have hurt us are forgiven and treated with compassion. In this kingdom we will choose love over anger because Jesus' love is transforming us. Now, that's radical.

Thanks be to God. Amen.