

GOD'S GRACE

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Intro

When I felt led to select the Gospel passage from Matthew, it felt extremely important to hear what these words from our savior were founded upon. Why? Because as Jesus himself tells us, he came not to destroy the law and the words of the prophets...but to fulfill them.

This foundation comes to us, again, from the words of Moses. The directive to the Hebrew people can be summed up in the phrase that we will hear in verse 2: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'

Those who hear these words, and the context from which they emerge, especially in light of what we will hear in Matthew, may then say, and rightly so, 'but this was how God was calling for the Israelites to live was in relation to each other, not individuals from other kingdoms'.

I cannot disagree with that critique: it's true.

However, what we need to focus on is that this is the foundation, and what Jesus is building through us, is the next step. The scripture reads this way.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

19The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Matthew 5:38-48

Intro

What we are about to hear is hard because it causes us to question what, for many people, is an instantaneous response. When we are wronged, when we are injured, when we are hurt, what do

people want? They want justice. They want to get even. Many would even admit that they 'want revenge'.

Recently, on a news report, I heard a loved one speaking about their relative who was killed when an intruder broke into their home to rob them.

Their response was totally understandable: 'He was killed in his home. He wasn't doing anything wrong. He should get the same treatment that he gave to my uncle.'

We get that. Many of us have thought the same thing.

But what do we hear from Jesus?

As hard as it is to hear (let alone actually try and implement), what Jesus builds upon the foundation of 'be holy and love your neighbor as yourself' is 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'.

Simple question: how do we do that? The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 5:38-48

38 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

"God's Grace"

I don't know about you, but I don't like this passage from Matthew. I do not like it one bit.

It's hard. It's too hard.

'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

How God? How is that supposed to happen? How are we supposed to show grace toward those who don't deserve it? How are we supposed to show grace toward those who have taken so much that was not theirs: through stealing, abuse, rape, murder? How are we supposed to step into this place that Jesus has built, let alone actually live there in such a way that who we have been called to be has a snowballs chance of actually happening?

'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. How God? How are we supposed to become that person?

I recently heard a radio interview where the host and author of a book discussed two sets of parents' responses to the senseless murder of their respective children.

In the first case, the father became consumed with punishing those who have broken the law: any law. Why? Because his daughter's killer had been convicted a multitude of times for a variety of offenses. What emerged out of that crusade became known as the 'three strikes' law. He wanted justice.

The second case detailed a mother and how she responded to the arrest of her daughter's killer 15 years after it had taken place. They talked about how she had not yet moved to a place of forgiveness, but the sort of eye for an eye punishment that many of her neighbors were calling for (whereby the killer would be hogtied before meeting his ultimate end), was not something that the God whom she worshipped would ever condone. She too wanted justice, and her position as the parent of an innocent victim could have led her to carry a mantle for the sort of justice that many of us would applaud (at least in the quiet of our minds). But her faith led her to trust in a justice that was beyond this plane of rationality.

'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. How are we supposed to become that person?

The short answer is that 'we' cannot.

The examples that Jesus gives, and the call that he places before us to 'be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect', are things that we cannot achieve. This is one of those places where the Reformed understanding of 'total depravity' sums it up extremely well: if our decisions were left exclusively up to us, and did not have the leading of God's Spirit working in our lives, we would, invariably, do what is contrary to the life that God is calling us to lead. And even if we did something 'good', it would be done from a place of self-benefit.

Said again, we cannot be perfect.

We cannot display the sort of grace that is implicit in the sort of 'turn the other cheek' reality that Jesus is calling for us to implement in our lives. Not on our own.

I think that reality is on perpetual loop right now in the political culture that we have fostered. On every side we have individuals who exhibit the tendency of grabbing for revenge (because too often, it's not about truth, it's just about winning) as opposed to anything that resembles grace.

This reality just reinforces that on our own that the sort of expectation that is before us is not able to be achieved by us.

But are we on our own? If we are walking a life of faithfulness that connects us to the Divine through prayer, worship, study of His Word, and service, do we really think that we are on our own?

I think you already know the answer that I would give to that question: absolutely not. When we journey through our lives in that way, God is incredibly close to us and allows us to exhibit that which is impossible.

That's why it is called God's grace. Yes, it may be experienced through our actions...but it's God. God makes beautiful things, even out of dust, even out of us (Beautiful Things – Gungor).

But the only way we are able to have that chance is by being committed to a life of faith.

Otherwise, it makes no sense, and seems utterly contrary to the justice that we long for, the justice that we have been promised by God.

We worship a just God who has promised that all those who have done what is evil in His sight will be punished. God has promised justice.

But that is not the end of the story (and we should thank God for that reality) because if it were the end of the story, then we too would be so worthy of the condemning justice that we feel so ready to inflict upon those who have wronged us.

Jesus came, not only to declare that we should exemplify such grace in our lives, but to actually live it out. He was innocent and yet he was deemed guilty...for us, for me, for you, on a cross.

The God whom we worship makes no sense to our worldly perspective of wisdom, and we should be so utterly grateful for this fact, because it will be through senseless acts of grace, both large and small, that the Spirit of God will work through us to seep into the crevasses of a world so infused with sin that the only way that there might be the opportunity for faithful relationship with the Divine to exist, was through the murder of His son.

As I said, it makes no sense.

And that is why when we ask the question of how are we supposed to 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you', that I come back to a response that we heard in our scriptures a few weeks ago by walking humbly with our God. The only way that such grace can be exemplified through our lives is when we are connected to Him in prayer, worship, study, and service when we humble ourselves and even then we may be at a place where we have to offer our lust for justice up to God because our pain is too great.

It is okay to long for justice but as a people of faith, that earning must be held and directed by the God who was willing to forgive even us.

Remember, if it were not for the sacrifice of Jesus on a cross and his resurrection from the grave, all of us would be rightly deemed guilty in the eyes of the Lord: all of us.

It is only because of His freely given grace, a grace that we did nothing to earn, that we have the opportunity to walk with Him in such an intimate way that we too might be bearers of such confounding grace.

But we must humbly journey with Him, through prayer, worship, study, and service. God's grace is not something that we are able to exhibit on our own, and the only way that there is a possibility of doing the impossible, of living the illogical, is by journeying with Him.

God's grace has embraced us. Let us journey in such a way that it can flow through us.

It doesn't make sense to us. But this is who God has called us to be.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, what we have heard this morning doesn't make sense, and beyond that it is impossible. Both these statements are true, and yet your call to exhibit Your grace remains pointedly before us. Grant us the strength to be able to walk with You in faith through prayer, worship, and study so that even though we may not understand, we are able to faithfully trust in You and allow Your grace to be felt in a world that so desperately needs it. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.