

“Christian Abnormality”
Matthew 5:38-48
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Yes, you heard correctly. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples to turn the other cheek, forgo revenge, give more than the required in a lawsuit, go the extra mile, give to all who beg, lend without limits, love the enemy, pray for persecutors and greet the stranger. And while we are at it---why don't we also secure world peace? That last statement was pure sarcasm in case you were wondering. I'm guessing some of you may have been thinking along the same lines.

Talk about setting the bar high . . . Jesus asks for behavior that is the exact opposite of our “it's all about me” culture. It is difficult to imagine much less practice living in such a way.

It is so much easier to be mean, to hold grudges, to distance ourselves from and ignore those in need. Besides, if I give to everyone who begs I will have nothing left for myself and my family. If I turn the other cheek I will only get slapped repeatedly. If I get sued—I will hire the best lawyer I can to ensure justice is on my side. If I love my enemies, I will be persecuted even more, possibly even killed. If I am too nice, I will be seen as weak, a pushover, a doormat. Jesus' instructions seem unrealistic. And if those instructions were not difficult enough Jesus tops them off with one more, “Be perfect,” he admonishes.

When Jesus says “be perfect” we may hear that we are to be morally perfect but that is not what the Greek word implies. “Perfect,” in this case, stems from telos, the Greek word for “goal,” “end,” or “purpose.” The word is in the future tense and is more about becoming what is intended – accomplishing one's God-given intention for our lives. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* gets closer to the mark when he translates it, “You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity.” The first step in living out our God-created identity may be in remembering exactly what that identity is. Let me tell you a story about Ruby.

Ruby is a mentally challenged adult in another pastor's congregation. She functions well enough to work at a local restaurant, live in a group home and attend church. Ruby had many conversations with the pastor about who she was as a child of God and after gaining a certain level of understanding asked to be baptized. Ruby heard during her baptism that God named her a child of God and claimed her as such in the waters of

baptism. Ruby took those words to heart and often introduced herself saying, “I am a beautiful child of God. God named me and claimed me in the waters of baptism.”

One night on the way home from work, Ruby was assaulted by a mugger. She resisted the attack rather than give up her purse. The mugger escaped by hitting her in the face giving her a black eye and busted lip. The pastor was called to the Emergency Room where Ruby was being treated and went back to be with her. Stitched up and waiting to be released, Ruby paced back and forth saying, “I am a beautiful child of God. God named me and claimed me in the waters of baptism. I am a beautiful child of God. God named me and claimed me in the waters of baptism.” Ruby caught her reflection in the mirror and stopped her pacing. “I may not look like it now but come see me tomorrow for I am a beautiful child of God. God named me and claimed me in the waters of baptism.”

Ruby had grasped the deeper reality that she was a beautiful child of God irregardless of her appearance, irregardless of her behavior because God had named and claimed her as God’s own. Ruby knew what we are tempted at times to forget—there is another reality at work ---God’s reality. The reality that God has also named and claimed us as children of God in the waters of baptism and gives us the help of the Holy Spirit to live into our identity. As the Apostle Paul and Bob reminded us in last Sunday’s sermon, God has begun a good work within us and is at work transforming us into our best selves as God intends.

As Jesus instructs us to love others it is helpful to remember Jesus was not simply referring to feelings. Jesus’ use of the word **love**, while not excluding feelings, probably referred primarily to **actions**. To love the Roman soldier or the face-slapping persecutor was not to experience “warm, fuzzy feelings” but to act in a positive way. Jesus makes the point that in these situations, love is something you do, not something you feel. It is normal to return love for love and hate for hate in human society everywhere. As Jesus urges us to turn the other cheek, forgo revenge and go the extra mile he makes it clear the Christian response must be **abnormal**; we are to respond positively to negative acts and attitudes. We can only be change agents as salt and light in the world if we do something other than returning love for love and hate for hate. This often requires a conscious decision on our parts to act differently from how we feel—to consciously choose to take the high road. This sounds so good in theory and then life circumstances occur where the rubber meets the road. For me, the challenge was to be grace-giving towards my ex during our divorce. Being grace-giving was the absolute **last** thing I felt like being. I did not do

this perfectly, but I did better than I would have on my own knowing what God expected, knowing my children were watching, having friends that encouraged me to be my best self in the midst of the struggle. Being salt and light in the world is often the conscious decision to not return hate for hate.

In the last few weeks we have watched a revolution unfold in Egypt. During the protests, one news agency reported an event in which Coptic Christians in Tahrir Square were salt and light in the world. It happened as it became prayer time for Muslims and they unfurled their prayer mats to kneel in the street. As the Muslims prepared for prayer the Christians made a protective circle around them. By standing guard over the Muslims as they prayed to Allah, the Christians protected them from reporters and protestors walking by. After centuries of differences and sometimes hostilities between their faiths, those Christians acted lovingly, protectively towards other children of God. Think of the witness that is on the part of those Christians. What kind of change do you suppose their actions can make in the hearts of Muslims and in the world?

Choosing to be love in action is precisely the challenge Jesus places before us. It is the challenge of living in the kingdom of God, here on earth, as we choose to think of others first, as we make decisions based on the common good rather than our own good and as we act toward others with love. We are able to live this way because God empowers us with God's love. We know all too well we cannot come up with this love on our own. We are able to be gracious, forgiving, hospitable and generous because we are children of the God who showers us with abundant grace and love and mercy and generosity. Since we have experienced God's love we can now love our enemies; since we have experienced God's forgiveness we can now forgive those who would persecute us, since we have experienced the generosity of God we can now give back to those who have so little or nothing.

This is God's vision of God's world where genuine, unconditional love reigns. In this passage, Jesus is not setting impossible goals for us or trying to shame us into being perfect but reminding us we are not alone in this world and that God continues to work in and through us. We can only do these things—repaying evil with good, forgiving and praying for those who harm us—to the degree we live into our God-given identity as blessed and beloved children of God.

How would the world be different if we all were able to live into our God-given identity? What difference could we make in the world if we lived and moved and had our being confident in the knowledge we are beloved

children of God? How would that confidence enable us to love others as children of the kingdom?

Would it be easy? Absolutely not. So many things get in the way – past disappointments, old wounds that have yet to heal, jealousy, the fear that we will be taken advantage of. Painful memories that are slow to fade.

What gets in the way of your being the kind of person God created you to be – forgiving as God has forgiven you, loving as God unconditionally loves you, offering grace rather than judgment? What keeps you from giving your coat to another---giving generously?

Take a moment and think about one thing that holds you back from living into your God-given identity. One fear or one memory, one hurt or one resentment that keeps you from becoming the person God created you to be. I invite you to give that challenge to God, to trust God with the very thing that needs to be transformed within you. Perhaps giving our challenge to God will enable us to sense being embraced by God's redeeming love yet again. Maybe it will help us leave this place more willing to love, forgive and help others. "Be perfect," Jesus admonishes. Perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves. Be loving as God is loving.

You are kingdom people, blessed and beloved by God and called to be salt and light in the world. Go, be who you are! Amen.