

Follow Me 4

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8th March 2009

Matthew 5³⁸⁻⁴⁸ / James 2¹⁻⁹

(Show video-“Charlie Bit Me”)

Nowhere is sin more obvious than in the state of our relationships with one another. For some reason it is ‘in relationship’ that we discover both the best of humanity and the worst.

We’ve been talking recently about following Jesus. About what this means for us, about the fact that this is at the heart of the Gospel call and about how we are to do this. Another way of looking at the whole topic is to ask about the context of Jesus’ call to follow Him. What is the ‘currency’ of followership? What is the life blood of our commitment to Jesus? If a fish swims in water what do we swim in when we’re following Jesus. What is the atmosphere of our life with Christ?

I believe Jesus would answer this with one word... relationship. Following Christ is about relationship with God and relationship with one another. Following Christ leads us out of a sin scarred and completely distorted relationship with God and with each other and it reconstitutes those relationships until they become the thing of beauty they were designed to be. Even the Christian concept of God is mediated, infused and determined by relationship. If you’ve ever wondered about the Trinity think on this; at the heart of the Christian belief in the Trinitarian God lies the mystery of relationship. **God exists in and through relationship.** It is the divine relations which reveal to us who God is. Now that’s a bundle to swallow and I’m not going to expand any further on it but I would simply ask you to believe it for now.

The fact is, we are given ‘relationship’ as the context of our followership. It appears that even worship is considered less important than the state of our relationships with our brothers and sisters. Jesus Himself warns us in Matt 5 that to worship while a brother still has something against us is wrong. We should go and be reconciled to our brother **before** we worship.

Fully one third of the sermon on the Mount, 36 verses out of 111, is devoted to how we should relate to one another; what our duty is in regard to relationships; how we should love one another. And this is not just an in house thing. This is not simply about how Christian should relate to Christian. This is specifically about how we should relate to people who are not just ‘outside the family’ but who are, indeed, **our enemies.** We are to consider sacred even our relationship with our enemies. And we will have enemies. The one who follows Christ will have enemies. Jesus says to His own brothers...

⁷The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. (John 7)

And again...

²⁰Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. (John 15)

So Jesus effectively gives His disciples two lessons on relationship to hammer home how important this is in this passage. And from these lessons we are to learn how important relationships are to we who would follow Jesus. The first is that we will have enemies. We will always have those who stand against faith and specifically against Christianity. And He says to us, "Don't be surprised at the fact that you have enemies. If I had them, you will have them. If you're following Me, you will have them. But how you treat your enemy will be a sign of your followership. What you do with your enemies and to your enemies will be a sign and a witness of the fact that you are mine."

The second is that we will have friends – people who essentially believe the same stuff we do and who are on the same path of followership we are on. And again Jesus says, "How you treat these people will also become a sign recognisable by all people, that you are followers of mine. The nature of your relationships one with the other will become the most effective witness you have of the fact that I live and that you follow Me." Now think about that for a moment. That's an incredible statement. You mean we don't have to say anything to glorify God? You mean we can raise up Jesus just by how we treat each other? You mean we can make an incredibly effective statement just by how we live in community? Yes to all of these though I would say that God does use our words and our spoken testimony. It's just that if our lives do not appear to be in concert with our words, our words become a betrayal rather than a witness to Jesus. If we are speaking about the love and grace of God and our relationships are full of envy, malice and bitterness then we may as well keep quiet. But what does this mean specifically. How are we to live this out? Let's look a little more closely at the passage before us today.

In Matthew 5 we can discern two very clear central themes in Jesus' teaching. The first concerns revenge and the second concerns the nature of love. Jesus is concerned to hammer home to His followers that revenge is to be cast aside. As Mahatma Ghandi was keen on telling people, if the world followed the OT's injunction of and eye for and eye it would largely be blind. And Jesus takes this further by encouraging us not to resist an evil person. Is this really what we should do? Should we give into every persons will and whim regarding us? What are we to make of this? Three things are indicated by the words of Jesus.

The first is an extension of the well known and oft repeated OT principle of vengeance. In Deuteronomy 19 we read these words...

¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. (Deut 19)

Revenge was to be solely in the hands of God when it came to internal relations. Jesus expands that view now and says quite clearly that even within those relationships which are not purely brother to brother or sister to sister, vengeance is God's. We are not to take up our right to an eye for and eye. We are to consider even the foreigner and the alien as we do a brother and a sister in Christ and we are to treat them the same.

One of the most disturbing things about pastoral ministry is to discover how quickly we Christians become the aggressor in a dispute. Put 5 Christians into a sports team and watch what happens when the other team starts playing a bit rough or cheats a little. Man do things get ugly in a hurry! Or if we're involved in someone else's carelessness on the road. How many Christians yell a few things out the window just to remind the transgressor of how stupid they've been? Worse than this however is the way we communicate with those we love; with our families and friends. By far and a way the greatest problem within marriages these days revolves around communication and particularly around conflict resolution. It's here that we find people who truly do love one another treating each other, in their manner of communicating or **not** communicating, like mortal enemies. Sometimes the reason for this exists in the past and it is important and entirely possible for individuals to work through that to the point where they don't have to communicate in this way. In other instances it is simply a matter of learning better communication techniques and a weekend's work can turn an unbearable relationship into something absolutely enjoyable again. Whatever the case the point is this; Jesus wants us to treat enemies differently. We may not be able to make them friends. They may never accept that. But treating them as enemies is quite a different matter. Vengeance is mine says the LORD and what is God's we'd better not try to take!!

Second point: Evil is still to be resisted. The principle in regard to vengeance is about people rather than principles – it is about how to treat real people – not about political situations. It doesn't mean we should do nothing about evil. It does not mean we should say nothing or do nothing about evil. There is a role for peacekeeping and there is a role, I believe, for self-defence and for fleeing from evil. There are situations in life where bullies must be confronted – where the innocent and the weak and the vulnerable must be defended. However, I believe what Christ is saying to us here is that we Christians need to clean up our own backyard before we can pretend to be righteous in matters which have a more regional or global impact. A man who cries out against injustice in the public arena but who is treating his wife or children in a manner unworthy of Christ is a hypocrite and hypocrites cannot follow Christ.

Point 3: Prefer forgiveness. You may have heard of the Christian principle of 'preferential option for the poor.' This phrase was first used by Catholic liberation theologians in South America in the late 60's and became a catch cry for Christian social service throughout the world. It is a thoroughly biblical interpretation of how we ought to act towards the poor and assumes that we have a special duty to treat the poor and disadvantaged with some positive bias in order to alleviate their suffering. What I now lay out before you is a similar principle but in some ways more wide ranging and is based on the idea that **following Jesus requires a special approach to all relationships**. So here is a new Christian principle based on Matthew 5 where we are taught not to seek vengeance on our enemies and especially the great commandment found in John 13

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13)

What it assumes is that despite any right we might have – perhaps to retaliation for some hurt or injustice which has been personally meted out to us –**we set aside this in favour of the one who has hurt us. In other words we take up a preferential option for forgiveness**. And this is what should characterise our personal relationships – forgiveness, favour, kindness, willingness

to help, gentleness. This gathers up both Matthew 5 and John 13. It gets us into a right relationship with both our enemy and our friend and it sets the scene for our following of Christ. This is the fundamental thing God would have put right before all else. This is the thing that will allow us to follow long term. When we make God's call to put our relationships right here on earth then our relationship with Him is truly based on Christ because this is what Christ calls us to.

A dramatic example is the experience of a Hungarian refugee -- to protect his privacy we'll call him Joseph Kudar. Kudar was a successful young lawyer in Hungary before the uprisings in that country in 1956. A strong believer in freedom for his country, he fought Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest with his friends. When the uprising failed, he was forced to flee the country. When Kudar arrived in the U.S. he had no money, no job, no friends. He was, however, well educated; he spoke and wrote several languages, including English. For several months he tried to get a job in a law office, but because of his lack of familiarity with American law, he received only polite refusals. Finally, it occurred to him that with his knowledge of language he might be able to get a job with an import-export company. He selected one such company and wrote a letter to the owner. Two weeks later he received an answer, but was hardly prepared for the vindictiveness of the man's reply. Among other things, it said that even if they did need someone, they wouldn't hire him because he couldn't even write good English. Crushed, Kudar's hurt quickly turned to anger. What right did this rude, arrogant man have to tell him he couldn't write the language! The man was obviously crude and uneducated -- his letter was chock-full of grammatical errors! Kudar sat down and, in the white heat of anger, wrote a scathing reply, calculated to rip the man to shreds. When he'd finished, however, as he was reading it over, his anger began to drain away. Then he remembered the biblical admonition, "A soft answer turneth away wrath."

No, he wouldn't mail the letter. Maybe the man was right. English was not his native tongue. Maybe he did need further study in it. Possibly this man had done him a favour by making him realize he did need to work harder on perfecting his English. Kudar tore up the letter and wrote another. This time he apologized for the previous letter, explained his situation, and thanked the man for pointing out his need for further study. Two days later he received a phone call inviting him to New York for an interview. A week later he went to work for them as a correspondent. Later, Joseph Kudar became vice president and executive officer of the company, destined to succeed the man he had hated and sought revenge against for a fleeting moment -- and then resisted.