

*Going the Third Mile*  
Lessons: Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus says our ways are not his ways, that old ways must be replaced by new ways. Jesus comes announcing that the rule of God's love has come to make all things new – including us. The new life in our lives comes by following his new ways. He does not leave us to ourselves to do whatever we think will make things new. Jesus spells out the new ways that make things new in God's rule.

*Question:* How can things be new unless we try the new ways? How can we experience God's way of love unless we try God's way?

*Answer:* When we love others the way God loves, we love differently, we take on new ways, and life goes better.

When we look at our lives and think about applying Christ's love in them, we know that it works. It works with our families, it works with our friends, it works in our communities like church where we hold common commitments and common bonds - where we can talk about being part of one group, members of one body of Christ.

But why would Jesus say applying his love works with the people we don't put in our group, that we keep out of our family, that we do not want in our church, that we want to stay away from us. Why would Jesus say that living God's way of love will work with our enemies?

“Enemy” - Let's confess it. We all have an enemy somewhere...

We live in a world that divides between friends from enemies, neighbors from strangers, locals from foreigners, Texans from all others. Some people divide “believers” from “unbelievers.” There are Christians who think that anyone who disagrees with their divine revelation of true belief is an enemy of Christ and will go to hell – and they wish these unbelieving disagreeables would go sooner than later.

Sure, we all are around people who are neither friends nor enemies, that are somewhere in between - but mostly because we are not facing them, noticing them at the time. When we take notice, we are pretty quick to separate them into the camps – sheep from goats, friend from foe.

The dictionary as a wider definition of “enemy” than the way we often use the word, but it may be enlightening: “the opposing side, not on our side;” “competition or rival,” “bitter foe or combatant.”

Maybe our “enemy” is that person or idea that is not on our side about one thing, sometimes the person who is always disagreeable, and sometimes we think of the other side in some kind of conflict, a family feud or an armed war.

Maybe “enemy” is a nameless, less-than-people group we label and keep distant so that we can imagine them a little less human, a little less human than we are.

Maybe “enemy” is some idea that we automatically see is the opposite of the way we think

things ought to be - like “communist” or “socialist,” “muslim” or “jew,” like “liberal” or “conservative.” We label opposing ideas as “enemies” so that we won’t have to listen to them. We call enemies names so that we don’t have to remember their names.

Maybe “enemy” is some ONE, I mean a particular person who has wronged us, slapped us in the face, hurt us. Maybe we are victims of their aggression, their selfishness, their meanness or manipulation. Maybe we have scars or wounds from the battles.

One thing is sure, whether nameless group, labeled idea, or particular person – they are *not* our friends, and we do not want them as neighbors. We may not call them “enemy,” but they meet the definition. They are not on our side.

Jesus said to his followers, “You have heard it said from old times, love your neighbor and hate your enemies.” Do you realize that we are still living by the old law: We love your friends, and we do not love our enemies, even if we do not hate them.

The old time law: Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Let’s be honest. We prefer a fist to the jaw for slap in the face. They make you pay, and you make them pay dearly. They make you walk a mile, you make it a longer mile for them. We think that escalation is the key to deterrence, even when we build enough bombs to destroy us, too. Or justify not talking to a sibling for years because they called us names the last time we talked – and we remember.

Justice means retaliation. Mercy is for neighbors, but justice is all we have for enemies. And being just means we only give slightly more than we have gotten. We don’t want to destroy them, just make them hurt more than we do. Because as we have been told forever: if we are “soft” on enemies, they will want both eyes, two miles, another target for terror. Eye for eye really means deterrence, and deterrence means building more bombs than they have, or yelling louder in the argument, ...until we may live next door, but they are NOT our neighbors, until we may live in the same house, but it has been years since we shared our hearts with each other.

We read these passages, and we talk about “turning the other cheek” or “going the second mile,” but Jesus is telling us more than that - miles more than that. We talk about not retaliating but still want to hate and keeping the hate to ourselves. We talk about turning fences into walls, turning conversation into chit-chat, turning mates into stalemate. We talk about NOT treating our enemies the way they have treated us. That’s the best we can do, the limit of all we can do for enemies.

Jesus does *not* say we won’t have enemies. Jesus says that everyone is our neighbor. *Even your enemy is your neighbor to Jesus.* And we are supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves, therefore, we are to love our enemies as ourselves.

We are not supposed to look to our enemies to shape our actions; we are supposed to look to God to define our actions. You are commanded to do to your enemies what you want them to do to you. It’s not between you and your enemy. It’s between you and God. Our behavior, our decisions about what we do and how we treat other people, is not determined by what they do to us. It is shaped, defined, determined by one fact, by one truth, by one reality.

The reality you may have already experienced in this worship service, or the one that you may have missed by going through the motions and not expecting your life or the world to be different. I'm talking about the forgiveness – not the confessing our sins, but God's forgiving our sins. Do we miss that part? Or do we really "get it"?

*Question:* How do we experience God's way of love unless we try God's way? How can things be new unless we try the new ways? How do we receive God's forgiveness unless we forgive those who sin against us?

At this table, we know that in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, the only way that works is God's way - in our lives with God, in our lives with others, in the ways of neighbor with neighbor, in the ways of enemy with enemy. The way it works differently are the new ways God works instead of the old ways we have worked.

The more I see how crazy the world is,  
the more I see how stupid we humans can be in our affairs with other humans,  
the more I see how we keep walking the path that we know leads to nowhere,  
the more I see how we keep turning the cheek and hating our enemies more,  
the more I see how we carry the burden of hate the second mile and only add to the burden,  
the more I see the way that we want our enemies to pay more than we have paid,

...the more I wonder when will we become desperate enough in our hating of enemies and our denying of neighbors and our determination to keep trying the same ways that keep defeating us,

...the more I wonder when we will finally come face to face with the cross of forgiveness and realize that the way God has changed the way we live with God is the only way we can change the way we live with others. Then God will turn our enemies into neighbors, when we will know we are the friends of God.

Maybe then after we have turned the other cheek, we can extend the hand to the enemy in friendship like God has done with us, maybe then after we have carried the burden of the enemy's hatred the second mile, we can invite enemies to put the burden down and walk another mile with us until we learn each other's names and lives.

I know it sounds like idealistic silliness in the world we live in, until we realize that we are the ones who have made the world we live in the way it is, and until we realize that the real reason we are still living in this craziness of our sin is the grace and forgiveness of a God who has been more willing to die than to kill to tell us we who were enemies have become friends.

The way of God with us is forgiveness, and God has walked the third mile. If we put our burden down at this table, we can walk the way with God and turn enemies into friends. Maybe if we love our enemies like Jesus commands, we will forgive them their sins against us and we will know better that God has forgiven all our sins at this table.