

SEEING PEOPLE AS GOD DOES

Scriptures: Matthew 5:38-48; Romans 12:14-21

There is a comic strip carried in some newspapers around the country called Kudzu. The main character is a Quaker minister. In one strip the minister stands in the pulpit and says, “Brothers and sisters, today I want to give you a test—a spiritual maturity test. This test will measure your level of spiritual development as a congregation. Okay, ready? First question—complete this sentence: ‘Whoever will smite you on your right cheek ...’” In the next frame people from the congregation shout answers: “Waste ‘em! Clean his plow! Sue his carcass! String ‘im up!” In the last frame the pastor says, “I may be forced to grade on the curve.”

There is a bumper sticker you may have seen. It says, “I don’t get mad; I get even.” But Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Then in verses 43-44 he takes it further. He says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Which brings me to today’s question of faith: “How can I love my neighbor when he threatens my life?” The question actually refers to Islamic Jihad—a group who sees it as their religious duty to wage war against Americans. But the same question applies to people much closer to us. How do you love the family member who seems to despise you? How do you love the boss who demeans you, or the co-worker who makes your life at work so miserable? How do you love the person who cheated you in business or injured you through negligence? At the least we want to sue their carcass. How do you love someone who has hurt you or wants to?

The key is Jesus’ observation in verse 45. In verse 44 Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” then in verse 45 he says, “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.” The key to loving difficult or hurtful people is to see them the way God does.

Some time ago I read a book by Alexander Solzhenitsyn called *The Gulag Archipelago*. In 1945 Alexander Solzhenitsyn was serving as an officer in the Russian army when he was arrested for criticizing Josef Stalin in a letter to a friend. He was sentenced to 8 years in the Soviet prison system known as the Gulag. Part of the book describes the degradation and suffering Solzhenitsyn experienced at the hands of the Soviet guards. He easily could have been filled with bitterness and hate toward his captors. But he wasn’t. Because part of the book is an amazing self-examination of his own life and how he himself showed cruelty to others during his time as an officer. He writes,

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

He goes on:

During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil (chapter 4, p. 168).

That is seeing people the way God does. This week it occurred to me that when Jesus said God "makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous," he is not talking about two different classes of people. He is talking about two different characteristics that exist in the same person. We are the evil and the good squeezed into same body. We are the righteous and the unrighteous rolled into one person.

There are many examples of that in the Bible. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. But this same Abraham tried to palm off his wife as his sister so that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, would not kill him in order to take his wife into his harem. How is that for a noble husband? Then there is Jacob who cheated his brother out of his inheritance by deceiving their blind father. But God gave that inheritance to Jacob anyway, and Jacob's name was changed to Israel. Or King David. David arranged to have Uriah, one of his own army officers, killed in battle so he could take Uriah's wife Bathsheba into his harem. And David was considered one of the good kings of Israel! God sees all of us as a mixture of good and evil, and maybe that is what allows God to put up with us.

Having said that, God is not afraid to confront evil and injustice. After cheating his brother and deceiving his father, Jacob had to live in exile for many years where he himself was deceived and cheated by an uncle. In the Bible what goes around comes around. The same was true for King David. After stealing Bathsheba from her husband, David later had some of his own wives stolen from him by his son Absalom, when Absalom launched a rebellion and took over the kingdom from his father. In the Bible sin has consequences, and those consequences have to be faced. But God still keeps sending the rain, God still keeps raising the sun, God still keeps caring for us.

In his book *Forgive and Forget* Lewis Smedes tells a poignant story. A friend of his named Joe owned a bakery on the edge of a poor urban neighborhood. Joe was very popular with his customers. He sold day-old bread at half the supermarket price, and whenever kids came to buy his sweet rolls, Joe threw in a sugar-sprinkled donut for free. But one day as Joe was closing his store three kids from the neighborhood walked into the store, pulled a gun, and cleaned out Joe's cash register. Then, as they were leaving, one of the kids named Sam shot Joe in the stomach. Joe almost died. Lewis Smedes writes,

While Joe was in the hospital, the parents of the kid who shot him came to see him. They were decent, devout folks, poor like most people in the neighborhood, and now bent heavy with shame. One night they brought Sam; nobody ever thought they would get him to come.

So how did Joe react? Smedes writes,

Joe forgave Sam. He decided he was going to look at Sam as a weak human being who needed a chance instead of as the rotten kid who shot him in the stomach. ... But Joe never meant to put up with shooting people in the stomach. Nor was his neighborhood ready to tolerate what Sam did. So when Sam came to trial, Joe was a sad but convincing witness for the prosecution. Sam spent a year at a juvenile detention center (p. 47).

Loving your enemies does not mean condoning the wrong they do or allowing them to keep on doing it. For just a moment turn back to our first scripture lesson from Romans 12 (NT, p. 162). This is another example of something I mentioned two weeks ago: the importance of reading the Bible in context. In Romans 12:19 Paul says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” But now look at the next chapter: Romans 13. In Romans 13 Paul talks about the role of governing authorities, and in verse 4 he says, “For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.”

Loving people does not mean condoning or permitting their wrongdoing. Wives and husbands do not show love by allowing their spouses to abuse them. You do not show love by allowing a classmate at school to bully you or other kids. You do not show love by allowing a business associate to cheat or steal from you or anyone else. You do not show love by allowing terrorists to go on bombing people or criminals to go on assaulting people or totalitarian governments to go on oppressing people. Jesus does not ask you to give up justice, only hate.

And that is what Joe did. After Sam got out of juvenile detention, Joe talked to Sam’s parents about helping Sam find a part time job where he could earn money instead of stealing it. The job was sweeping the floor and wiping down the shelves in Joe’s bakery.

Remember what Lewis Smedes said about Joe. He said, “(Joe) decided to look at Sam as a weak human being who needed a chance instead of as a rotten kid...” That is looking at people as God does—the same way God looks at us.

- Ken Onstot
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