

Text: Matthew 5:38-48

Spiritual Wisdom is Often Unconventional

In the name of Jesus, the Giver, Interpreter, and Fulfiller of the Law, dear fellow redeemed:

Warren Buffet has made billions of dollars by wise investments and sharp business practices. One piece of advice for investing from him goes something like this: "When people are scared, be bold. When people are bold, be scared." Using this philosophy he has made vast purchases when the stock markets were down and people were afraid of investing. He and other wealthy people are not afraid to think outside of the box.

Spiritual wisdom can also be very unconventional. It goes against the grain of the way that we think naturally. To think like Christ we have to think outside of the box, so to speak. This sort of thinking and understanding is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. May that same Holy Spirit open our hearts to understand His Word this morning.

1. Conventional/Natural: Me first Unconventional/Spiritual: Dead to self

Our natural tendency as human beings is to look at God's commands in a way that suits us, and looking at it through a prism that is natural not spiritual. In this way we end up following God's Law in a very mechanical, external way, and we think that we have done what He has commanded. Jesus laid this idea to rest in His Sermon on the Mount. Our text is taken from this sermon, and in it we find that Jesus lays out the true spiritual interpretation of God's commands and shows the love behind them.

Verse 38 is part of God's Law. It is recorded in Exodus 21 among other places: *An eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth.* Over time the Jewish religious leaders looked at this in a

conventional way and came up for the idea that a person must seek vengeance if he is wronged. The first mistake that they made was that this was an instruction for the government of Israel, not for individuals. Secondly, while it did give permission for justice, the idea was to set a limit on retribution.

We have this natural tendency to up the ante when it comes to our version of justice. You've probably have heard some version of the "Chicago Way." If they bring a knife, you bring a gun. If they send one of yours to the hospital, you send of theirs to the morgue. When we are wronged we want to see the offender hurt not only as deep as we have been hurt, but even more deeply. That's the natural way.

In the verses that follow, Jesus gives the correct interpretation of what God desires. Turn the other cheek. Give someone the shirt off your back. Go the extra mile. Don't turn away those in need. Even with these words though, we might want to taint what Jesus is saying and think that this must be followed in a mechanical way even when it would conflict with the rest of the Scripture.

Here is what I'm talking about. We might look at verse 39 and think that if someone smacks me that I must stick my face out and he must strike the other cheek. Or in verse 42 we might think that we must let somebody sponge off of us continually. But the Lord also tells us to take care of our bodies. Self-defense is not a sin. In 2 Thessalonians the Lord tells us that if a man would not work neither should he eat. He does not command us to be enablers.

What He's after is unconventional, spiritual thinking. The essence of verses 38-42 is becoming dead to self. It is about deflating your ego for the sake of Christ. Think of the opposite of these things: seeking revenge, being bitter, grudgingly going one mile (This was a Roman law. The military could force a civilian to transport goods a mile for them). Don't loan to anybody at anytime. These are things that anybody can do

with no effort at all. Keeping God's Law takes effort. It is not just about avoiding doing certain things. There is a whole other side to God's Law which requires activity. That activity requires you to be dead to self. It requires love directed outward toward your neighbor.

If you wish to spend the rest of your life seeking vengeance, keeping score when you've been wronged or cheated, or demanding your rights, then you are in for a miserable existence. You will never be happy. The Lord gives you a higher calling of love and not keeping score. That calling of love is one that He operates on. He chose not to keep score in His relationship with you, and a good thing that He didn't.

This type of spiritual, unconventional thinking is very difficult. At times we're deathly afraid that if we don't stick up for ourselves, then we're going to be taken advantage of. If I don't hit somebody back, then I'm going to be bullied. If I do even one iota more of work than is required of me, or if I perform a duty that the city or county normally does, then I'm just some poor sap who is going to be walked all over.

Become dead to self. Take chances in the direction that Jesus is pointing. Will you occasionally be taken advantage of if you're generous? Probably. But that doesn't mean that you turn into a miser. If you always do the bare minimum, will you have done your duty? I suppose, but don't you have more in you? Jesus has called you to generosity, liberality, and not keeping score. He has called you to a high, spiritual calling as His disciple.

2. Conventional/Natural: Hate your enemy Unconventional/Spiritual: Love your enemy

You can see how this type of thinking that Jesus is laying out here will not come to human beings naturally. The carnal mind does not function in this way. We have more examples in the second half of our text. We read verse 43: *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor' and hate your*

enemy. Notice here that only the first half is part of God's Law. The scribes added the second half figuring that it would be the opposite of the first. Again this was natural, conventional thinking. It was not understanding the God who wrote the Law. First of all, there was not the understanding that your neighbor is everyone, and secondly there is not a limit that God sets on love.

We have this natural mindset of putting ourselves in a circle with others and declaring that it is us against them. The "us" and "them" varies. In Biblical times it was Jew and Gentile. Now it could be Christian against Moslem, or the United States against China. Jesus here does not deny that we may have enemies. We might. Here though is the spiritual thinking: *Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven*. Even though we are at war with terrorists does not mean that they are eliminated as our neighbor, and it does not eliminate them from a list of people that we would love. Even better take this to a personal level. That person who annoys you at work. That person is also your neighbor and the object of your love and one that you should pray for.

The Father sets the standard and the directive. Love the wicked as though they were not. We read in verse 45. *He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust*. The evil people of this world still receive earthly blessings. The Lord shows Himself as a Benefactor and a kind and a generous God. This is His nature. His is the One that is our model. The Lord does not treat people in exact proportion to their treatment of Him. He loves the wicked as though they were not, and He expects His children to do the same. That is the Law of love. He lives and rules with love doing what He knows is best for both the just and the unjust. How people treat you should not dictate your treatment of them.

You as a Christian have a high calling. You are unique in this

world. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

This is very intimidating. We're not perfect. Far from it. When was the last time that you prayed for someone that you did not like? When was the last time that you prayed for the terrorists who are even now planning the demise of this country? When was the last time that you didn't keep score? One reason that people like to apply God's Law in a very external, mechanical way is that it seems within reason that we could keep it. When we interpret God's Law correctly and see the broad scope of love that is required and the activity that is required, then it is hopeless. We cannot complete what we need to do.

This makes the work of Jesus all the more incredible. Consider how His reputation was trashed as He walked this earth. There have been horrible things said about public figures, but it pales in comparison to what Jesus dealt with. He was called a blasphemer. He was hated for doing the right thing. He did take slaps on the cheek, a bloody crown of thorns, and was insulted and spit upon. Yet when He was reviled He did not revile in return. He did not seek revenge, but in excruciating pain on the cross said, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

It took God Himself to keep this Law of love. It took a God of love to then give you that righteousness and credit it to you. It takes a God of love to forgive lost sinners such as you through the blood of Christ because we have trampled all over His Law. We were ignorant, and many times want to remain in ignorance, but He educates us about what is good and pleasing to Him. Our God is love and has made us His children, not because we have followed His commands, but in spite of the fact that we haven't. Unconventional? Yes, indeed. But our

God is unique, spiritual, and He has the same in mind for us as children. Amen.