



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Angel of Marye's Heights

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ AUGUST 26, 2018

Our Scripture lesson for this morning comes from the Sermon on the Mount, a passage of Scripture that I hope is very familiar to many of you. Those of you who have diligently been studying Scripture will have read this many times. The Sermon on the Mount has great significance for Christians. It was delivered on a hill where my dear friend Tzachi Kolumbus, who is the tour guide for our trips to Israel, has a demonstrable theory on exactly where Jesus was standing to deliver it. Given the acoustics of the hill and surrounding area, there is one place where, if you speak in a full voice, your voice can be heard all throughout the area.

We can think of The Sermon on the Mount as our “Christian Manifesto.” If we are believers and disciples of Jesus Christ, this is what it looks like. This is what it means to not only be a disciple of Jesus, but to be in relationship with each other; how we view God, how we view the world and our life in it. It explains what life as a disciple of Jesus looks like.

One of the things you will discover in reading the Sermon on the Mount is how counterintuitive it is. There are so many things in it that are contradictory to the way the world thinks. Sometimes, you might think Jesus must have been daft! You are in a blessed state when you are mourning? Blessed are the meek? The meek are the ones who will inherit the earth? The world thinks that the strong are the ones that are blessed, and they are the ones who will inherit the earth. You are blessed if you are being persecuted?

We can account for the difference because we follow a different Master. Jesus, at first glance, might seem overly idealistic or even crazy.

In fact, He is eminently practical. The Sermon on the Mount really encapsulates what it means to be His disciple. In this sermon, He often quotes from the Old Testament, sometimes from the Ten Commandments or some other teaching. It is as if He were saying that Moses brought us just so far, and though there is nothing wrong with what Moses taught, Jesus is now going to take us the rest of the way. Remember what Jesus said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). He takes us to the meaning of what Moses taught; He provides the full extension of what Moses’ teaching implied.

The Challenge

Our passage today is one of the most difficult to get our arms around. At first glance, it might seem awfully idealistic. As I said a moment ago, Jesus is eminently practical, and He means what He says. Hear now, as I read from Matthew 5:43-48.

“You have heard that it is said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

On the very cold day of December 14, 1862, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the Federal armies and the Confederate armies were at the height of what is known as the American Civil War. The battle in Fredericksburg was one of the most horrific, cataclysmic battles of that war. At one location in the battlefield at Fredericksburg, the Confederate soldiers were lined up behind a stone wall, just in front

of a low road called the “sunken road,” at the foot of what is known as Marye’s Heights. Way down the hill, across the Rappahannock River, were the Union forces. They had been given the absolutely ridiculous, disastrous order to cross the river, go up the hill, and attack the troops at the wall. As the men followed those orders and faithfully attempted to assault their foe, millions of bits of Confederate shrapnel from the muskets, cannon fire, and canisters swept the field, mowing down the Union soldiers to the point that there were literally thousands of dead and wounded covering the ground. As the day went into evening and on into night, there was the constant sound of cries for water, cries for “Mama,” and cries for mercy from Almighty God. It was a very bright, moonlit night, and snipers on both sides shot at any movement.

The Opportunity

A sergeant named Richard Rowland Kirkland from South Carolina heard the cries and went to his commanding officer to ask permission to take a bucket of water over the wall so he could give solace to the wounded soldiers. His commanding officer said, “No! Are you crazy? The minute you go out there a sniper’s going to take you out! And, by the way, those are the enemy! You’re not going to go out there and do that!” Sgt. Kirkland, against orders but because something was moving in his heart, at the risk of his life, repeatedly went over the wall with a bucket of water to aid the enemy wounded. There were cheers from both sides of the line—both armies—for what he was doing.

You would like to think that with this kind of example, both sides would figure it was stupid to be shooting each other; that they should stop. But, because of the fallenness and the sin of human beings, we seem to continue to reenact scenes worthy of *Dante’s Inferno*. That is why it says in Ecclesiastes 3:8, “There is a time for war. There is a time for peace.”

There is a monument now in Fredericksburg commemorating Richard Rowland Kirkland. The monument reads:

At the risk of his life, this American soldier of sublime compassion brought water to his wounded foes at Fredericksburg. The fighting men on both sides of the line called him “The Angel of Marye’s Heights.”

Somehow, in the midst of all the mayhem and madness, this farm boy from South Carolina brought a glimpse of humanity. It is very easy for people to romanticize this story, and they have done so. One could say that this young man no longer looked at them as his enemies; that he had an overwhelming sense of the universal brotherhood of man, so he performed this great act of humanitarian charity. I suggest to you that the story is much richer than that. He very well knew that the Union soldiers were his enemy! They had been shooting at him all day! He knew perfectly well that when the sun came up the next day, they would continue to shoot at him! Though he knew full well that they were his enemy, and in the midst of that madness and mayhem, the law of love transcended the fact that they were enemies. There was a glimpse of sacrificial love in the face of horror.

My friends, this is a key to Jesus’ teaching that I read from the Sermon on the Mount. In verses 43-44 He said, “You have heard it 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...”

In Jesus’ teaching, what is missing? He does not say to go out and make those people your friends and once they become your friends, then love them. He does not say when those people stop persecuting you, then pray for them out of gratitude. No, Jesus wants us to understand that while they are still our enemies, before anything changes, He wants us to love them. While they are still in the midst of persecuting us, we must pray for them!

We might say that this is the first step in making them friends—but maybe not. They may not respond to your overtures; they may remain your enemy. What is important is that we are not defined by what other people do or who other people are; rather, we are defined by who **we** are and what **we** do as disciples of Jesus. Who we are does not depend on the response of another. Luke adds even more to

what Jesus said in Luke 6:27-28 when he wrote: “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

His Disciples

Why do we do this? This is the proposition of the **grace** of God through our Lord Jesus Christ; this is the way in which God has dealt with us! Romans 5:8 says, “...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” It does not say that once we come to faith or when we finally have our act together He was willing to die for us. No, while we were still a pain in Jesus’ neck and mired in our sin, while we were still an offense to Almighty God, Jesus died for us! That is the **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ. As His disciples, we believe that Jesus, through His sacrificial love, went to the cross **while we were yet sinners**, paid **our** price, and **then** brought us to faith. He tells us, His disciples, to go and emulate this in our own sphere of influence. We are to follow His ways, not the fallen ways of humankind. Christians are called to be different!

Many Christians say, “We know we Christians are no different from everyone else.” I think what people mean when they say this is that we are sinners just like everyone else. If that is what we mean, we are right. We do not present ourselves as somehow being superior or “holier than thou”; that is not what we are called to do. But if we say we are no different from others, why in the world would anyone else want to be a Christian? There had better be a difference! People would ask why they should mess with this Christian faith if it made no difference in our lives! But there is a significant difference, because we follow a different Master; we have a different relationship with Almighty God.

Look what Matthew says in verse 45: “... so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” The common view is that, by virtue of the creation, we are all sons and daughters of God and, on one level, that is true. What Jesus is saying here is that if we are going to have that special intimacy, that closer relationship with Almighty God, we are

disciples of our Lord Jesus. We are living our life in the way He calls us so that we become a son or daughter of Almighty God.

Have you ever told your kids something similar, reminding them from what family they have come? I used to tell my son as I dropped him off at school, “Remember who you are, and whose you are.” He used to hate that, but he got the point. He was representing the Grant family; he reflected the Grant family. When we call ourselves Christian, everywhere we go we are representing our Lord Jesus. So, what do people see in us? I would hope that there would be a major difference between us and others.

A Special Love

God has for everyone what we call “common grace.” Notice what He says in verse 45: “For he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” God’s common grace is for everyone, so we are supposed to be able to love both friends and enemies just as He does. But we must be very clear about the love of which we are speaking. You have heard us at FPC use this word frequently: “**agape**,” which is a certain type of love. Agape means a self-sacrificing, unconditional love. The world views love entirely as a feeling. That is why we see situations where people say they have “fallen out of love” with another person which leads to a divorce; or this person was a friend, but I do not love him anymore because he proved to be a bad guy. Relationships can be broken because our feelings are very volatile and can change minute by minute, hour by hour, or season by season.

Agape love, which is the word that Jesus is using here, is not dependent on feeling. People ask as they read this story about loving our enemies, “Do you mean I am to have warm, fuzzy feelings about my enemy?” Hopefully you will eventually get there, but no, that is not what it means. This is where Jesus is eminently practical. He is not expecting you to have warm, fuzzy feelings about your enemy. What He is expecting is that you **agape** your enemy; that you have self-sacrificing, unconditional love for them. It is not dependent on how you feel at any given moment.

Husbands and wives and soon-to-be husbands and wives, this is the vow that we make to our spouse when we say, "I promise to love you for the rest of my life." How many times do we see people who cannot do that? They say that love is forever, and then they break up because they equate love with the feeling. **Agape** never ends! It is the only way a 24-7 relationship is sustained throughout our life. When we make our wedding vow, we promise that for the rest of our lives, no matter how we might be feeling at any given moment, we pledge to **agape** our spouse. Agape love is self-sacrificing, which means that there may be times when we must set aside our agenda or how we feel or what our needs are to unconditionally love another.

That is how Jesus loved us. It is self-sacrificing and unconditional. This is the gospel: God looks at us as if we had never sinned a day in our life! His love is not dependent on us and what we did; it is dependent on what **He** did and **who** He is. This is the character of a Christian. It should be in our spiritual DNA that we are born again and transformed; this ideal, self-sacrificing, unconditional love is just what naturally flows from one who has truly given his life to Jesus. But, do you know what? You really do not **give** your life to Jesus. He claims it! We experience it as if we have given our life to Him; we feel as if we have made a commitment, but He claims us! He wants us! He wants our hearts! He wants our life!

A Different Master

Christians are different from the world because we follow a different Master. Look what He says in verses 46-47: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do this?" What difference do they see if we only love those who love us? Even those tax collectors and Gentiles and all those others that we do not like can do that. What is different about us? We emulate Jesus! In this way we witness that there is a better way to live. This is how Christians change the world!

My friends, this is not without risk; this is not without hurt. Look what happened to Jesus! There are some defeats, but it is still a witness that God's way is ultimately the best way; that through us God

shows the world that there is a better way to live. Because we are sons and daughters of God and not sons and daughters of the world, we can embrace what Paul taught in Romans 12:21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Now we come to the most difficult part of the teaching, verse 48: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” I know what every one of you is thinking: “How can I be perfect? No one is perfect except Jesus!” How does the Christian embrace a passage like this? Well, we embrace this passage for two reasons. First, while it is true that nobody is perfect, we refuse to use that as an excuse for not living as a son or daughter of God. And second, it clearly reveals why we need a Savior. You see, the standard is the perfection of God.

I always find it interesting when people say, “Well, I’m not so bad.” An old wag once said, “There is nothing that is so bad as something which is not so bad.” Why? Because that lures us into a false sense of security. People say that they are not as bad as someone else. One of my favorites is when someone says that at least he is not as bad as Hitler. That is good! I am glad that is the case, but Hitler is not the standard by which we are judged, nor is any other human being. We are judged by the standard of Almighty God, and therefore we all fall short.

Our Savior

Yes, we need a Savior and that is why Christ died for us. That is why we put the cross in the front of our church; it’s not just for decoration. What does it stand for? It stands for **agape**. It stands for self-sacrificing, unconditional love. When I look at that cross, I realize that my sins were bad enough that He had to endure them and to pay the price; I should have been up there. I am the Christ killer! I am the one who is responsible for Jesus having been on that cross. God is the One who put Him there; it was God’s solution, but it would not have been necessary were it not for me! Now, because He did that, even in all my sinfulness, Almighty God looks at me as if I had never sinned. He says, Steven, when I decide that your life on

earth is over (and I will decide), you can come to Me and you can spend eternity with Me in a place where I cannot and will not tolerate sin. You will see Who your Master is. You, as His disciple, are called to go and do likewise.

Who are the enemies in your life? Do not tell me that you have none or you have never had any. All you need to do is look deep into your heart to know who they are or who they were. What is still in your heart about an individual or group of people?

I want to leave the image of my namesake in your hearts and minds, that of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. (I always feel compelled to add when I mention him that you are not to get any ideas!) It says in Acts that when Stephen preached, it was as if he had the face of an angel. He was preaching in Jerusalem, and as he did so the crowd got angry at what he was saying. As the anger grew and grew, they started to pick up stones and throw them at him, just like the firing that went on in Fredericksburg. As Stephen continued to preach, mob mentality took over and more and more stones were thrown. Ultimately, Stephen perished just like His Savior. This deacon, *diakonos*, this servant of Jesus Christ, like his Savior, prayed to Almighty God for his persecutors, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60), and then he perished to glory.

Do you remember the words of our Savior to the very people who had just put nails into His hands, tortured Him and humiliated Him, and hung Him on that cross to die a horrible death? He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). That, my dear friends, is our Master. If all of us can embrace that spirit as part of our relationship and our walk with our Lord Jesus Christ, then He will enable us in our own sphere of influence to be an "Angel on Marye's Heights."



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org