



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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***“Yes, Them Too!”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Matthew 5: 13-16, 38-48*

*May 11, 2025*

Allow me to start by resetting the stage a bit. We are now in week two of a spring series centered on a song that was shared by our Uker-ists and choir last week. It's called 'Lean Into the Light.' It's by a singer/songwriter by the name of Carrie Newcomer, so if you were not here last Sunday, you can look it up, and we will come back around to it on our Celebration Sunday on June 8. Based on that song, however, the focus of our spring series is what it means to lean into the light of God. Last week, we talked about the opening phrase of the song, and we were reminded that the heart of leaning into the light of God is embracing the fundamental truth that we're not always going to understand it. God's work and will are often beyond our perception, and leaning into the light of God includes our acceptance that doing so means trusting that things are at work even when all evidence suggests that they're not.

The other thing we touched on last week, however, is that leaning into the light of God really takes two forms. Our first impression, I think, is that leaning into the light of God is our faithful act of searching for God's love and light in the midst of any darkness we might know – and it is! There's an equally important piece, however, when we are reminded that leaning into the light of God isn't just about claiming God's light and love in our darkness, but bringing God's light and love into the darkness of those around us.

That's what this first portion of our reading from Matthew 5 is all about. We find ourselves here, of course, in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, right on the heels of the Beatitudes, and Jesus moves into this brief passage about the disciples as the salt and the light. 'You are the salt of the earth.' 'You are the light of the world.' We can talk all day about what that looks like, and we will spend some time on that question today. There's not a lot to say, however, about the base implication and the meaning of what Jesus says here. As people of faith, we have the blessing and gift of leaning into the light of God in the midst of any moments of darkness that this life might bring upon us. As disciples, however, we also have the responsibility of bearing that light of God into the lives of others.

Now, there's nothing new or groundbreaking in that. I don't think there are many that are going to argue that point. Jesus doesn't leave a lot of ambiguity here, and I think we can all agree that part of our role as children of God is to bring the light of God into the lives of others by helping, by serving, by comforting, by listening, the list goes on. I do, however, think that there are

pieces to this particular puzzle that fall into that category of ‘easier said than done.’ I think there are elements of this call of leaning into bearing the light of God into the lives of others that go a bit beyond lending a hand here and there. And that is what brings me to our second reading for this morning, just a bit later in Matthew 5, starting with the 38<sup>th</sup> verse.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

*43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 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. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

This is no easy command that Jesus is putting in front of us here. ‘Easier said than done’ is, frankly, an understatement. This notion of ‘proportional punishment’ was a longstanding concept throughout ancient times. It shows up in the Hammurabic Code. It makes its way into the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. It was a common sensibility throughout the peoples and cultures of the ancient world. Exodus 21, verse 23-24, says ‘If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.’ This concept of equal measure of harm – of two wrongs making a right – was a cultural norm.

It would not be altogether surprising, then, to have Jesus address and reframe such a sensibility. To have Jesus speak into that retributational mindset with a perspective of grace and forgiveness makes sense. Even for us, to consider a message of working towards forgiveness instead of seeking revenge fits well within our understanding of what Jesus called us to do and be. The problem, however, is that that’s not the argument Jesus makes.

Allow me to revisit the points Jesus makes in the course of those eleven verses:

- ‘You may think it’s an eye for an eye – but I’m telling you to not even fight back!’
- ‘If someone hits you in the face, offer the other side so they can hit that side too.’
- ‘If someone tries to take your shirt, give them your coat also.’
- ‘If someone asks a small favor, do a big one.’
- ‘Don’t just love your neighbors, love your enemies as well.’
- ‘Pray for those who do you harm.’

That’s not a message of forgiveness, or even one of reconciliation. If we’re honest about it, it starts to feel like a message of calling us to subject ourselves to the abuse of others. It was after I had already printed the worship orders for today that it came to mind that I should have titled this message, ‘Doormats for Christ.’ Because, that’s what this starts to feel like. If we look at what

Jesus says in just these 11 verses, it starts to feel as though Jesus is telling us to lay down and be doormats that everyone else can just walk all over. That is, of course, until we broaden our perspective a bit and look at the context of these words.

Remember, we're in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. After the Beatitudes, Jesus shared those words about his disciples – about us – being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Then, he immediately jumps into talking about what that looks like, and he does that by reframing old concepts and laws into new ideas and understandings. This is the section in which he says that 'You shall not murder' is not enough – that we shouldn't even get angry with others. This is the speech in which he says that lust is just as bad as adultery. This is the moment that he says that the issue isn't swearing falsely in God's name but bringing God at all into that which we expect to control.

My point is that this entire segment of the Sermon on the Mount throughout the fifth chapter of Matthew is one in which Jesus is making the argument that the old rules need to be reframed in our hearts and in our minds. Jesus is making the argument that the old rules that governed our behavior missed the point. Because the point wasn't simply about our behavior, but about the setting of our hearts and minds that lie behind them. Again and again, in different ways throughout Matthew 5, Jesus makes the point that the laws pertaining to our actions fell short, because what matters is the nature of our hearts and minds that drive those actions in the first place. And that is precisely what's going on in these eleven verses we are focusing on today.

As much as those verse may read as a command to become 'Doormats for Christ,' that's not the point. There's no implication here that we are supposed to simply subject ourselves to the abuse of others for the sake of God. The point, as it is throughout this fifth chapter of Matthew, is a hyperbolic exposition on the setting of our hearts and minds that lie behind our actions. We're not literally supposed to invite someone who's beating us to beat us more. We are, however, supposed to love even our enemies and pray for those who have harmed us. Why? Because the point here isn't actually about our actions. The point is the heart that stands behind them. And, the heart that Jesus is expressing throughout these words is, in its simplest form, one of kindness. That, I suggest, is what these eleven verses are really all about. When we push through the exaggerated claims of these verses, we find a fairly simply and straightforward mindset for which Jesus is arguing. When we push through the hyperbole, what we find is a heart that responds to every circumstance by asking, 'How can I show kindness here?'

- How do I show kindness to one who is harming me? I don't fight back.
- How do I show kindness to someone who needs my shirt? I give my coat also.
- How do I show kindness to my enemies and to those who do me harm? I love them and pray for them too.

Jesus used hyperbole far more often than I think we sometimes realize, and he uses it throughout this fifth chapter of Matthew as he explores what it means to lean into bearing the light of God into the lives of others. When we press through that exaggeration in these verses in question this morning, however, what we find is pretty straightforward. What we find is Jesus encouraging us to respond to each and every circumstance, quite simply, with kindness.

Those who were here last week may recall that, while the global notion of our series stems from the overall song that our Uker-ists shared, my weekly messages that fall into those two patterns of leaning into the light of God are actually drawn from particular nuggets of wisdom or challenge that stood out to me in the lyrics. Last week, it was the opening words of the song. Today, it's those that come near the end. It's one simple phrase. In the final stanza of the song, the singer proclaims, "When forgiveness is hard to find, help me to at least be kind." That, I want to suggest, is the heart of Jesus' teaching in these particular verse of Matthew 5.

Forgiveness is a complicated and difficult topic to discuss, much less to actually enact in our lives and relationships. We've spent sermons and seasons on it in the past, and we will again. We will wrestle with what it seems we are called to do, and we will struggle with how we fail to measure up to that call in what we actually do. Forgiveness is hard. Forgiving is hard. Looking at the person who has wronged us is hard. The challenge Jesus lays before us in these verses, however, is actually pretty simple to understand. As hard as forgiveness may be – and even when it's not coming quite yet – there is one first question we are called to ask as we seek to bring God's light into that darkness. No matter the circumstance, no matter the hurt, no matter the anger, no matter the forgiveness and reconciliation that might still be on its way – there is not to be a question of revenge, or retribution, or expectation of any kind. No matter the circumstance, no matter the hurt, no matter the anger, no matter the forgiveness and reconciliation that might still be on its way – as those called to bring the light of God's love into that darkness, the first question we are compelled to ask, even in regard to them, is how we respond, in that and every moment, with the light that is the kindness of God's love.