

Sunday 17th July 2022
Matthew 5:38-6:4
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Turn from dead end ways
- Adopt the Kingdom way of love
- Know and live in the Father's love

This week I don't have slides for you so you might want to follow along a bit more closely in your Bible, on your Pew, or in an app. You might want to get a smartphone or whatever you've got to follow along and we're out of the Manse again. Beetles are back so yeah, so, I just didn't have time for slides this week I'm afraid and so you might want to turn with me and the pew Bible to page 970 and we'll dig into God's word but let's first of all pray:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and lead us into the life of the Kingdom.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, I know we're not betting people but, who's your money on? Who's your money on? That's your question. Turn your neighbor. Who's your money on for leading the next government? So, over to you for a couple of seconds. Who's your money on?

Well, lots of opinions there I'm sure. I'm not gonna, we're not gonna take a straw poll so you can keep that to yourselves. But I don't, yeah, I'm certainly obviously watching with a measure of interest to see who will be the next Tory leader and so then, who will be the next leader of our government. But it was interesting, startling, worrying some of the commentary after the votes this week. The candidates being urged to drop out and what normally, I think might happen in a back room, was brought much more into the public sphere where some are encouraged to drop out and given the reassurance that 'You know if you drop out and you support this person, you get a place in the next government. And that is just a bit worrying to me, I must admit. But is there a bit in every political party, I don't think we can just lob stones at this particular one, and you know, as we get into this passage, I think it's there at times in all of our lives as well.

We're in the series going through the Sermon of the Mount and we've been seeing that Jesus is inviting us into the life of the Kingdom, the Kingdom way, this Kingdom culture he seeks to create in our lives and in us as a community and that Kingdom way often doesn't fit with the expectations or traditions that we're so used to and it certainly doesn't fit with what comes naturally to us. But, today, we have the next three little portions and in each one is helping us see not only how to live and how to live that Kingdom life, but also what to turn from.

So, let's see what we've to turn from first of all.

So, we're going to pick up from a couple of verses verse 38, 43 and chapter 6 verse 2 and in all these ways you're going to see that Jesus is calling us out of a dead-end way of life. So, verse 38 he says 'You have heard that it was said eye for eye and tooth for a tooth.' Now, this was a principle from the Old Testament law, the principle of exact

retribution and that was a development in civilization because, up to till that development, you took the law into your own hands and if someone took an eye you took a life. You just, you upped the ante and so you got a development of blood feuds within nations and in cultures. But God lays this foundation for justice. He lays a foundation to limit vengeance and to stop us taking the law into our own hands. And so, He gives a court system as well to His people of old. And you know like in everything we end up corrupting God's good provisions and ways. And so, what was meant to lay a foundation and encourages in a healthy direction, we end up turning into something else, we end up developing a perspective that says 'Well, it's tit for tat,' whether it be in politics, whether it be in our families, or in the workplace, it's tit for tat, everywhere. Church life. But no, and every one of the ways that we're going to look at there's an opposite side to it as well because, not only is there tip for tat that's a rule that we live like live by, it's also, if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. So, not only is there the kind of negative of eye for an eye but there's well, you know, if you help me, I'll help you out. If you love me, I love you and so, we pay back both injury and favor. And Jesus is saying that's a dead-end way of life but it goes on, there's more dead-end ways of life. Verse 43 'Now you have heard that it was said love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' Now the law didn't teach this at all. It's taught love your neighbor and as Jesus, we know from other stories, expands that to include anyone. But it seems that the teachers of the law had kind of overlooked that element and really narrowed it down because, in fact the law taught you to aid your enemy, if they were needy or and in need of some help. The law actually taught that but they added on hate your enemy. That is an addition, that is a corruption of the law again. Just human nature. We end up corrupting the good ways of God and so we end up developing that way of life that says 'Well, I'll only care for those who care for me. I'll only love who loves me and everyone else well, they don't really have a claim on my time or my affections or my needs or what I can aid them with, and I will either shun them or end up just hating them, and that's okay.' That's what we end up turning into but it was Martin Luther King who said 'Hate multiplies hate in a descending spiral of violence.' Hate multiplies hate in a descending spiral of violence. And it's another dead-end way of life that when we just go with what comes naturally, when we go with what we've been brought up in or what our culture says, we end up just loving those who love us and everyone else well, we might as well hate them because, if we're not loving them, then it's towards the end of the spectrum, it's another dead-end way.

And then finally, in chapter six, Jesus says, so verse two, 'So, when you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.' A dead-end way. There's nothing more to receive. That is what they've asked for, that is what they'll get. There's no more life for them or through them to others. Nothing more is available. It's a dead-end way. And you know, our culture is trapped in that. You might be trapped in that. That desire for affirmation, for to be honored. We see it in social media but we maybe see it in in our service to the church. We want to be recognized for now or and how we do our work. That we want to be recognized for that and our self-confidence so depends on it sometimes. But again, there's a flip side to that. Sometimes we use that ,that any need, because of the fall, we've got that innate

need for that and we end up withholding encouragement and affirmation. We know that it gives us a sense of power and so we end up just being discouraged often. There's just so much dead-end ways of life and I don't know about you, but I yearn to live a different way, to yearn to live more of a kingdom way that that brings life for myself, sure, but for others as well and how I treat them, how to treat folks in my family, friendship circles, and the community. That I'm not pursuing any of these dead-end ways.

So, not only does Jesus tell us what to turn from, He tells us what to turn to. And so, let's look at that just now. But central to all is one verse. I think in verse 48 that guides all three of our principles. It says 'Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.' Verse 48 'be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect.' And you know, up till this week I think I didn't really understand that verse or extrapolated it to include too many things because, if you look at the context, it's the context of our Heavenly Father's love and if you look at the equivalent in the Gospel of Luke chapter 6 Luke uses the words 'be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful.' God's mercy is His steadfast love. So, when Jesus says 'be perfect' He's saying, be perfect in love as your heavenly father is perfect in love.

What is God's love like is that selfless-giving love. There are various words that have been used over the years and centuries to talk about love. There were the four Greek words of:

eros - romantic love

philia - friendship love

storge - family love

but then there was the love that was called **agape** love. Agape – a love that wasn't based on feeling, like the other three were a love that was a choice, an act of the will, of giving of oneself whether you felt like it or not. That's the love of God. We see it in Jesus don't we. He loved us even while we were still sinners and chose to love, chose to display that love in this verse guides so much and these portions but really and much of the Sermon of the Mount.

And so, let's go back to see what Jesus says after those dead-end ways, after eye for eye. In verse 39 he says 'But I tell you I tell you, do not resist an evil person' and he gives some illustrations. Now, we need to know these are illustrations, they're not actually hard and fast rules as such, because, while an even evil person could respond in many other ways and the example in verse 42 where someone asks of you something well, they might not even be an evil person. What Jesus is trying to help us see is that the way of love does not respond eye for eye, tooth for tooth, does not respond to evil with evil, but with good, does not respond to a request for help with 'Well, you haven't shown me any love so why should I show you love.' Instead, we're called to go that extra mile, to do more than we simply must to help others, to give simply because someone asks. Because the way of love doesn't respond to others by how they have treated us. The way of love does not respond to others by how they have treated us. That is the way of love. Jesus goes on as well, after talking about love or neighbor and hating your enemies, He goes on in verse 44 'But I tell you, love your

enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' Again and again, we've seen how Jesus upends the teaching of His day. But it's not only of His day. How much of our day as well? We still hold to this although we don't maybe speak it out and yet He turns it on its head. Bonhoeffer, who obviously wrote in the earlier part of the 20th century and experienced world wars and atrocities of that time, he spoke of this idea of praying for those who persecute you and said 'Through prayer, we go to our enemy, stand by their side and plead for them to God.' It's not until you picture it that way that you maybe grasp what Jesus is saying here. I sure will pray for our enemies, really stand at their side in solidarity and pray to God for them. And, in case you think that Jesus has been unrealistic, remember what He did in His own life. Huddle have been reading through Mark recently and in the last couple of chapters we've been looking at the crucifixion and when you read the journey of Jesus to the cross it makes you want to cry because He's spat upon and He's beaten and He's flogged and He has a crown of thorns put on His head and He has a robe put on His back for a time which would then stick to those wounds and when they ripped it off it would rip the flesh off His back and then they forced Him to carry a cross to His own execution and then they nail Him to a cross and hang Him there to suffocate. And to those that did such evil He prays 'Father, forgive them. I don't know how, but He prays 'Father, forgive them.'

Love responds in that way and there's a choice of the will, that's agape love of God. And I wonder friends, where do you need to live out more of that love, that's selfless, indiscriminate love of God? It's not just for the people you like, not just for the people who scratch your back, not just for the people who invest their time in your life, but you give of yourself for anyone and they don't have to earn it. Is it maybe folks in the church that with some people you're warmer towards them than to others because well, those others are very good, they've given of their time, they've earned your respect, as it may be in family, you know maybe family hasn't called you up in months you're like 'Well, that's them done, I'm cutting them out, they don't deserve that.' Where do we need to live out the selfless, indiscriminate love of God that we might be freed from that dead-end way of life of maybe got trapped in because maybe instead of love we live in a place of bitterness or just perpetual criticism.

I was listening to a podcast the other day and the preacher said that some research suggests that the strongest marriages are those where the affirmation to criticism ratio is five to one and I'm pretty sure that probably applies in any area of Church life. So, what is our conversation like amongst ourselves, at home, in the workplace? Is your ratio five to one? I'm not sure I can say mines is. What about yours? Where do we need to live out the selfless, indiscriminate love of God a bit more this week?

Remember, you're beginning to wonder like me 'Well, how do we get there? How do we get broken free from that dead-end way, so that we can live this way of love?

Well, clearly, Jesus gives us the Sermon on the Mount in part to do that. As he says elsewhere 'the truth will set you free.' So, it's like, as the psalmist says 'His word is a lamp unto her feet to show the way to go.' But how do we walk that way? How do we stay in that way? Because, I don't know about you, but it kind of feels sometimes like

the darkness in me just has a really tough hard grip and it doesn't want to let go. Maybe it's just me.

I think there's something else in what we read today that speaks into that. Jesus says in chapter 6 verse 3 'But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you're giving me being secret. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.' Now, clearly, on the surface of this is a principle about how we respond to, think over our good deeds that He's critiquing those who would blow their horns and say 'Oh look at me! Look at me!' And Jesus is saying well don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, which is actually an impossible thing to do. So, he's clearly got a principle in mind. As one commentator put it, I think it was maybe John Stott, and he said that the principle is a principle of self-forgetfulness. Self-forgetfulness, so that the left doesn't know what the right does. It kind of forgets what's happened and he explains that, as rather than boasting about it like the Pharisees, but rather than being the other sort of person who doesn't do it publicly but in private goes over those good deeds and gives ourselves a bit of a pat in the back and says 'Oh look at me' rather than being either of those two ways, we pursue self-forgetfulness. We don't recall it. We don't mull over and just think 'Oh, how good I am. Look at my life.' we live a life of self-forgetfulness.

But to live that life I think requires another bedrock underneath it which is the one I want to draw it for us this morning because really, what Jesus is saying here is, live for what Your Father thinks of you. Live for what the Father thinks of you. Not what others think of you, not what you think of you, live for what the Father thinks of you. And the American puritans had a philosophy of living for an audience of one. Living for an audience of one, and by that I mean live for the audience of God, not your spouse, not your kids, not the church because I'd have 300 perspectives to live for. Live for the audience of one. Let that be the guiding principle of your life, for your choices, for your affirmation, for your security and self-worth. Live for an audience of one. The Father's love, the Father's affirmation. He doesn't always stand with a list of criticism, by the way, Remember the prodigal son's father didn't even get on to the negativity. So often we think of the Father as just up there what wagging His fingers but the Father is overflowing with love to you. Do you know He sings over you. Know the Father sings over you such is His love for you. I was dancing in the kitchen with Hope yesterday. I just love doing it not because I enjoy dancing but I loved doing it with Hope because she just, It's just such a joy. The Father has that love for you that He sings over you. And many of us need to learn how better to live in that audience of one because He doesn't call us just a cold religion, He calls us into relationship where you live out of His love and when you live out of His love then you don't need to worry about the perspectives of others quite so much, then you've got love to enable you to love, not just the people that love you, but even your enemies, then you've got love to be able to even respond to evil with love. But to live that way of life, to stay in that way of life we must know the Father's love. We must know the Father's love.

And there's no shortcut to that. It's being in His word. Coming afresh with His character, in His ways, especially being in the Gospels, seeing the life of Jesus, seeing and

hearing the words of Jesus, coming again and again to the cross and just seeing the depth of His love for you. For also being in the place of prayer, and I'm asking the Holy Spirit to come and reveal the Father's love to you because Ephesians chapter 3 what does Paul encourage us to pray because he prays it for them. He encourages them to 'ask for the Spirit so that you can know the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God.' You can't appreciate it yourself; you'll never plumb the depths of it but you'll never get deeper in that love without the Spirit's help. So, pray, be in the world, grow in the knowledge of God's love and live for that audience of one and that affirmation of the Father and maybe then we'll live out more of the way of love, the way of the Kingdom.

I pray it may be so. Amen.