

Matthew 5:38-48
Facing the Challenge

How in the world are we supposed to understand this scripture passage? I'm really afraid that I have made a big mistake here. You see, I have been thinking about this passage for several weeks now. I'm sure you all know how that is...you get a Bible passage in your mind and you just can't seem to get away from it? Well, that's what has happened to me with this passage from Matthew 5. When Professor Lyke asked me last week for my text, I told him I was going to preach from this text. And now I'm stuck with it. I mean, I really have a problem here.

But then, as I have struggled with this passage, wondering what in the world I was going to preach about it, I started struggling with the fact that I was struggling with the passage. What is there about this passage that I find so difficult to preach about? Now it's bad enough when you are struggling with a passage, but when you start struggling with the fact that you are *struggling* with something, then you really are in for a struggle! (And now you are all probably struggling to know what I am even talking about)!

Anyway, as I have struggled with this passage, I think that I have discovered what the problem with these verses is. The problem here is that Jesus is staking claims in this passage to the way that we live our lives. In the

Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5 through 7, and in particular in these verses 38-48, Jesus is making demands upon the way that we, as his followers, should act and behave.

Yes, I'm sorry, you understood me correctly. Jesus is making some *demands* on our lives and upon our actions. In fact, Jesus is saying in these verses that if you want to be a follower of his—if you want to be a Christian—you are going to have to live your life in a certain way. And that is the problem that faces us this morning/this evening. How in the world are we supposed to understand this Scripture passage?

Maybe I need to express our problem in another way. What do you have to do in order to be a Christian? And what does it actually *mean* to be a Christian? Is it something that you BELIEVE? Or is it something that you DO?

What's the answer? O, come on!! You know what the standard answer to this question is! You probably even know the bible text that we are conditioned to jump up and quote when asked this question! What is it? Ephesians 2:8-9, of course. Certainly we all know the answer to this question. Paul writes, "For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." And so there we have our answer already. What do you need to do to be a Christian? You must have faith. You have to have faith in Jesus Christ.

That's it. End of the story. You don't have to do anything else. Just have faith. Paul wrote it himself. Being saved, being born again, being a Christian (Paul tells us) is a question of FAITH. It is not a question of actions or good works. Otherwise, someone might try to boast about how great they are, right?! And we certainly couldn't have that! And so it is a question of faith. Period. End of discussion. Okay, let's go back to class..... (No, not yet. Our time isn't up yet. As far as that goes, I suppose that going to church or going to chapel is just like going to jail.....you've got to stay until your time is up!!).

And so there we have it. Salvation, being a Christian, is a question of faith. You don't have to do anything else except believe in Jesus Christ. It is by grace that we have been saved, through faith. Right? Can we agree on that? Great.

For many years, I felt pretty comfortable in accepting that salvation was by faith alone and that that was all there was to it. But several years ago, I had a conversation with one of the teens that I was working with in the church that we were attending in Holland. I don't know how we got into the whole discussion, but we were talking about different world religions. We talked about Buddhism and its entire system of self-denial. In order to gain "salvation", or in order to achieve the state of "Nirvana", the religion of Buddhism believes that a person engages in a long and slow process of working one's way up a long ladder of achievement. It is a long and grueling path of self-denial that a

serious Buddhist must walk in order to achieve the salvific state of Nirvana. That is one of the reasons why Buddhists believe in reincarnation. They need the extra time in order to do all the necessary work to earn Nirvana. And then we also talked about the religion of Islam. Devout Moslems also have a long and demanding battery of laws and actions that they need to adhere to in order to earn the favor of God (or Allah) and be found deserving of salvation. At a certain point in our discussion, this teen-age girl stood up and said, "Well, that is EXACTLY the reason why I am a Christian." When I asked her what she meant, she said, "I'm a Christian because I don't have to do anything at all! In all the other religions, there are so many things that you have to do. And there are so many things that they say that you CAN'T do. But as a Christian, I don't have to do anything at all. I just believe in Jesus, and it's all taken care of. Then I can do whatever I want to do."

Well, is she right or not? What does it mean to be a Christian? Can you see my problem now? If I tell you, "No, she is NOT right. There are in fact certain things that you need to do to be a Christian, and there are also certain things that you must NOT do in being a Christian. If I say that, then someone will end up saying, "Slow down a bit there, Powers. You're starting to sound pretty legalistic here. With all these rules and regulations and your "you have to do this, but you can't do that", you are starting to sound an awful lot like one

of the Pharisees out of the Bible. You can't earn salvation. It is through faith alone. It is NOT through something you do." And yes, that IS true!

But on the other hand, if I say that this teenage girl is right, and that you don't have to do anything at all in order to be a Christian, then I have quite a problem with the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5, don't I!?! Do you see the problem I have here? What am I going to do with Jesus' words in Matthew 5? Unless I am completely mistaken, Jesus is making *demands* on the lives of his followers. When I read Matthew 5:38-48, I have to admit that Jesus holds up some pretty high expectations for those who would want to follow him. And those expectations have EVERYTHING to do with the way that a Christian lives his or her life. These expectations have a lot to do with the way that I live my *daily* life.

How in the world should we understand these words of Jesus? And what does it really mean to be a Christian?

I am convinced that there are no easy answers to these questions. And I am also convinced that if someone jumps up and tries to give you an easy answer, then that means that they have either not carefully considered the question what it *really* means to be a Christian. OR ...they are not taking the words of Jesus seriously.

Today, I want to try to do something very radical. I am not sure if I am up to doing this. Because it really IS radical and fanatical. Are you ready for

this? Here is what I am going to try to do. I want to try to take Jesus' words here seriously, for a change. That is what I am going to try to do. I want to try to take Jesus' words seriously here.

Jesus tells his listeners that the life of the true believer is going to look *completely different* than the lives of other people. This is the way that he says this. "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.'" In other words, if someone does something to you, if someone wrongs you, you need to pay them back in exactly the same measure. Not too much, and not too little: but in exactly the same measure. Jesus says, "That is what you have always heard. That is what you have always learned. But I say to you, 'Don't repay evil with evil! If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other cheek as well. And if someone wants to sue you and take your coat, give him your shirt as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.'" Then Jesus says, "It is NOT the idea that you should only love your friends and hate your enemies. No! You need to love your enemies as well, and pray for those who persecute you."

Wow! These are hard words to deal with, aren't they? I knew that I was in trouble with this sermon when I opened up F.F. Bruce's book that is entitled, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, and I discovered that he identified 7 of the 11 verses of our Scripture passage as containing "hard sayings" of Jesus. How in the world are we supposed to understand these words of Jesus? We're going to

look into that in just a second, but first I want to make two observations that we need to recognize about these words of Jesus.

First, I think that it is important for us to understand that these words were difficult for the people back in Jesus' time, too. Sometimes we read certain things in the Bible and we think, "Well, yeah, that was easy *for them* to say or to do, but we live in a completely different time. *For US*, it is simply different." No. We need to realize that these were difficult words for the people back then, too. They *also* struggled with these words of Jesus.

But there is something else that I think that we need to realize as we try to come to terms with these words of Jesus. Do you know what I think? Jesus **KNEW** that these were difficult words. As a matter of fact, I think that Jesus *wanted* these words to be difficult. It was Jesus' *intention* that these words would be difficult for his hearers. Do you know why? So that the people who wanted to follow him would really think about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

You know, we really **ARE** creatures of habit. There are so many things that we do by habit. This is actually one of the great strengths of humanity. The fact that we can do so many things by habit instead of by conscious thought **ENABLES** us to save time, energy and concentration. Let me give you an example. Most of us don't have to think about how we need to drive home. When we leave here, we can just step into our cars and drive home without giving it a second thought. It is almost as if the car knows how to

drive itself home. And on the way home, we can think and contemplate and even worry about a million and one things, and before you know it, “Hey, I’m home!” It has simply become a habit for us to drive home, and we can do it without even thinking about it. It is a wonderful advantage to be able to do so many things by habit, without even thinking about them.

But the fact that we are creatures of habit is also one of the great weaknesses of humanity. So many times we can go through life without realizing what we are really up to. And that can sometimes have some very strange and odd results.

I’ve got to tell you about a professor I had at Nazarene Theological Seminary. Dr. Grider was an incredible theologian. You could ask him a question, and he could give you the author’s name, the title of the book, and even the *page number* where you could find the answer to your question in 3 or 4 different books. I have never met some one who had such an incredible theological memory like Dr. Grider. But strangely enough, while Dr. Grider could remember theological data like no one I have ever met before, he was the most forgetful person I have ever met. After living in the Kansas City area for more than 30 years, he would still get lost driving home from the seminary! There was one story that Dr. Grider told us that I will never forget. During one of the years of his teaching, Dr. Grider had to travel to Chicago once a month for a special conference that he was involved in. Chicago is about 500

miles or so from Kansas City, and so Dr. Grider flew every month to Chicago and back. One time, when he got back from Chicago, he called his wife from the Kansas City airport and told her that she could come and pick him up. She asked him, “Where did you say you were calling from?” He said, “From the airport in Kansas City. Can you come and pick me up?” His wife answered, “Listen, honey. You decided to *drive* to Chicago this time. Where is the car?” Well, as it turned out, he had forgotten that he had driven to Chicago, and so, as was his habit, he had flown back to Kansas City and he left his car back in Chicago!” Not so good! The fact that we are creatures of habit can also be one of the great weaknesses of humanity. But anyway you look at it, we ARE creatures of habit.

In the time of Jesus, there were *many* people who wanted to be around Jesus. I mean, it must have been great fun to hang around with him. He performed miracles, he healed sick people, he was able to feed the people in a miraculous way, he told lots of funny and interesting stories. It must have been a blast to spend some time around Jesus.

But in this passage, Jesus let the people know what it really meant to *follow* him; to actually be a *disciple* of his. And he told them that it means that your life will actually LOOK different than the lives of other people. Your life must be different. You have to think about the way that you are living your

life. You can't believe in Jesus and follow him, and simply continue down the same path as the rest of the mob. Your life must be different!

You know, I am afraid that we as Christians have made a terrible mistake. I am afraid that we have made the Christian life into something cheap. We've focused so much of our attention upon the words of Paul where he wrote that being a Christian is a question of faith alone, that we have overlooked that the same Paul also wrote in Philippians chapter two, "My friends, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12) and that Paul wrote in Colossians 2, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, now *walk* or *live* in him." The words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5 places DEMANDS upon our life. We can't go around thinking that we can just "*believe*" in Jesus, and then go on living our lives like we have always done. If you think that you can do that, then you are not taking the words of Jesus seriously. And you are making the Christian life into something cheap and meaningless. Jesus wants to exercise control over how you live your life. We have to take his words in Matthew seriously. And that means that our lives have to change. That means that our daily lives will be *different* than the lives of our non-Christian friends and neighbors.

Interruption: "Now just wait a minute, Dr. Powers! I think that you have gone too far. What do you want? Are you saying that we need to make up some

kind of list of rules that we all now have to follow? How legalistic can you get!?!?!?

And how do you suppose that we can take the words of Jesus here seriously? If I try to follow these words literally, not only is someone going to slap my other cheek, but they'll beat the daylights out of me. Besides that, I'll lose everything I own. I mean, after the second mile, there is always a third and then a fourth mile. What do you want from us, Dr. Powers?

Do you know what I want? Our theme for this year is the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians: "We are being transformed into Christlikeness." I would actually like to be able to recognize Christlikeness among believers today. I am not talking about some legalistic type of works-righteousness. I am talking about a "pressing on" among believers in our churches and in our schools to actually be transformed into the image of Christ.

I am afraid that this might be the church's biggest fallacy today. As I look around me in our churches, I see a lack of an earnest *striving* towards Christlikeness.

So what do I want? I want us to take our Christian life seriously. I want us not only to confess Jesus with our mouths, but also with our actions, with

our very lives. And the more I think about these words of Jesus in this passage, the more I am convinced that this is exactly what Jesus was trying to say.

You know, I really DO want to take these words of Jesus seriously. I really do! But how am I supposed to do that? How are WE supposed to do that? The more I think about Jesus' words, the more I come to the conclusion that it is virtually impossible to follow these instructions of Jesus literally. I can certainly turn my face and allow someone to strike me on the other cheek, but how am I supposed to follow the rest? I am the father of four children. If I do what Jesus says in these verses ("Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you"), if I do that, I won't have a cent left to take care of my own family. I can't do that, and I really don't think that Jesus would even *want* me to do that! Even John Wesley says in his notes on the New Testament that some of these words are certainly not intended to be understood literally (cf. John Wesley, *Wesley's Notes on the New Testament*, Matt. 5:40, 41). So what is it, then, that Jesus wants of us?

Jesus wants us to actually *think* about our life. The instructions that Jesus gives here are not the kind of instructions that you can "mindlessly" follow. The kind of life that Jesus prescribes for his followers is not something that just happens "automatically" or naturally. You have to *think* about it. The life that Jesus sets before us is something that we have to *pursue*. It is something we have to "press on" towards. Friends, Jesus wants and expects us

to actually *think* about our life. And he wants us to have the courage to live the type of life that runs upstream against the flow of the rest of the world.

I think that a person has to have “guts” to be a Christian. It takes courage. It takes commitment. And that is what Jesus is saying here. If you want to follow me, you’ve got to pay the price. If you want to be a Christian, then BE a Christian! Sure it’s easy to follow the way of the world. It sucks you into its mind-numbing and brain-dead stream. But it gets you nowhere. You have to have guts to be a Christian. I know it doesn’t sound very nice, but I have to think of the motto that I’m sure that we are all familiar with. No guts, no glory! Well, I’m afraid that this might be true of the genuine life of faith. No guts, no glory. If we don’t have the guts to really follow Jesus, if you don’t have the courage to stand up and move against the mindless flow of the world, there will be no spiritual victory for you. And your life will be meaningless. Think about it.

Today I want to ask you: Who are you? And what is *really* determining your life? If you want to follow Jesus, then he is going to have to have control of your life. And I am convinced that your life will be different. The life of each one of us reflects the one we are following. It is time for us to stop just going through the motions, and to THINK about the life we are living.

I wonder if this isn’t what the brother of Jesus had in mind when he wrote the words, “what good is it if a person claims to have faith but has no

deeds?” (James 2:14). I think that we all know that the foundation of the Christian life is based upon faith, and faith alone. But Jesus wants more from us than just our “faith”. He wants our LIVES!

Amen.