

The Seventh Sunday in Epiphanytide

Leviticus 19:1-3, 9-34; Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 5:38-48; I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Leviticus 19:1-3, 9-34 is the beginning of the social legislation of the book of Leviticus. And it is remarkable legislation. It begins that legislation by centering it in the imitation of the holiness of God.

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel, and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God’ (19:1-3).

In reality, Leviticus 19 is a commentary on the covenant made between God and Israel (Exodus 19-22), and particularly selected commandments of the Ten Commandments, fleshing out what each commandment means. It thus begins with a recollection of the Sinai Covenant itself (Exodus 19), which preceded the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).

The Sinai Covenant begins with God’s call to Israel. In his initial encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai, God declared, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possessions out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4-6a).

What did that mean – to be called to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”? The word confuses 21st century English-speaking readers, because to us the word “holy” means being perfect in goodness and righteousness. But that is not what the word “holy” means in Hebrew. *Qadesh* simply means “set apart” or “dedicated” to a particular purpose.

Therefore, what Exodus 19:6a means when it calls Israel “a holy nation” and what today’s Old Testament lesson means when it states “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2) is simply that Israel has been dedicated by God for a particular mission. To be called a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” meant that Yahweh had called Israel to a specific responsibility, a definite “job” as a nation – that of being priests. Whether they were conducting business with each other or trading with the nations of the world, whether they were adjudicating quarrels within families or working for national justice for the poor among them, whether they were dealing with children ostracized by other children or whether they were dealing with the immigrant from another country who was living among them, they were to act as priests. By designating all Israel as a holy nation of priests, Yahweh had revealed the essence of their call as a people. That call involved both special privilege and heavy responsibility. Being called to a national priesthood meant that they had been selected as the intermediary between God and humankind (the definition of a priest); that was their “special privilege”. But it bore “heavy responsibility” as well, for the fate of the world rested on their obedience of leading the world (through the service of God and humankind) back to God.

But how is the nation and each individual Israelite to “be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”? Leviticus 19 gives a most profound answer to that question – an answer that is an elaboration of the Sinai Covenant of Exodus 19 and of the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20.

Leviticus 19 lays out the 14 ways Israel is to act in a holy or dedicated manner. Israel as a nation, and each Israelite is to:

- ? Revere your mother and father (vs. 3)
- ? Keep the Sabbath (vs. 3, 30)
- ? Not worship idols nor practice witchcraft (vss. 4-8, 26-28, 31)
- ? Care for the poor (vss. 9-10)
- ? Not steal, deal falsely, lie or swear falsely (vss. 11-12)
- ? Not defraud or steal (vs. 13)
- ? Not take advantage of the vulnerable (vs. 14)
- ? Not render an unjust judgment or avoid responsibility toward others (vss. 15-16)
- ? Not take vengeance or bear a grudge toward your neighbor (vss. 17-18)
- ? Preserve the boundaries of the environment (vss. 19-20; 23-26)
- ? Act responsibly in regards to sexual practice (vss. 20-22; 29)
- ? Respect the aged (vs. 32)
- ? Protect the alien in your midst (vss. 33-34)
- ? Not cheat in the conduct of business affairs (vss. 35-37).

It is significant that each major section of social legislation presented in Leviticus 19 ends with the words, “I am the Lord your God” or “I am the Lord” (thus, 19:12 states “You shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord”). This is a reminder of the origin of this social legislation, and therefore Who it is who will hold you accountable for the degree to which you have obeyed or ignored this legislation.

There are certain pieces of legislation listed in Leviticus 19 that one would expect to have included – such as “revere your mother and father”, “keep the Sabbath” and “do not steal, deal falsely, lie or swear falsely”. But there are other pieces of legislation that are particularly provocative. Some of them are as follows:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God” (19:9-10).

This, of course, is the legislation that served Ruth to such a valuable degree when she and Naomi returned as widows to Israel (Ruth 2:1-23). It is an intriguing piece of legislation because it catches the essence of the Iron Rule, “Never do for others what they can do for themselves”. This law provides “for the poor and the alien” by requiring farmers and vineyard owners not to scour their fields for every inch of profit but to leave both the gleanings and the unharvested corners of their field. But at the same time, it also requires the poor and the alien to come into the field or vineyard and harvest what is left. They don’t get something for nothing (i.e., a free handout), but instead must work for what they receive; they are “doing for themselves”. But, at the same time, it is requiring business leaders to recognize the vulnerability of the poor and to intentionally conduct their business in such a way that the poor can act on their own behalf, so that wealth is shared. The result of such an arrangement is a cleaned-out field or vineyard, ready for replanting, and thus benefiting, in turn, the farmer, the market and the poor!

It is also worth noting in this piece of legislation, that the gleaning is restricted to the “poor and alien”. It is not for folks who are making it in that society; it is not subsidization of the rich or the middle class but of the two most vulnerable groups in Israelite society – the poor (which would include “widows” like Naomi and Ruth “and orphans”) and the alien (that is, non-Israelites who live in the Israelite society, worship Yahweh and follow Israelite law codes). So it is a most remarkable piece of legislation.

Another intriguing ruling is this one. “You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (vss. 13-14).

The word here translated “steal” (*ganab*) actually has more of a sense of “rob” or “take by force” than it has of taking something by stealth. It suggests a direct and forceful action rather than of a deceptive action. Thus, the author is saying that you are not to actively defraud or rob your neighbor. Such robbery includes the withholding of the wages of a laborer; when you do not pay a laborer immediately for his work but withhold those wages for a time period (the assumption here is that you have invested those wages in some way in order to make a profit off them), you are, in reality, robbing from your worker! What this injunction is presenting is the command that you are not to exploit another person – whether by defrauding your neighbor, not paying your worker in a timely manner or by taking advantage of a helpless (deaf, blind) person.

Still another social legislation appearing in this list on responsible citizenship is the one, “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor” (19:15). It is intriguing that the author recognizes that one can give the benefit of the doubt to the poor as well as to the rich, according to one’s inclinations. What he is advocating, on the other hand, is not a preferential option either to the poor or to the rich. Rather, he is advocating a purely objective justice.

A most intriguing ruling is this one: “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (19:32). The importance of respect in a culture is laid out here. The reason for showing respect to the aged is both because of their years and for the wisdom they have hopefully acquired.

One of the most powerful injunctions in this recital of what makes a nation “holy unto the Lord” is the statement, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (19:33-34).

This is a remarkable piece of legislation. It is designed to protect the life, property and rights of the alien. It is the practice of hospitality taken to its greatest degree. And it is a remarkable piece of legislation, decreeing that an alien is to be treated as if he were an Israelite, as long as he abides in Israel!

This legislation is taking the most vulnerable person in Israel – a person of another country, living and doing business in Israel, but with none of the rights of an Israelite or of protection by the Law (so that he is, in essence, a “man without a country”), and giving to him all the rights of a Jewish citizen while at the same time, urging the Israelites to show compassion on him and to treat him as a brother. And the reason for doing this? “You were aliens in the land of Egypt!”

Psalm 119:33-40 begins with the letter *he* (“h”) in the Hebrew alphabet. It is the fifth stanza of the psalm.

This stanza begins with the request, “Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end” (119:33). It is the beginning of a prayer for divine guidance as one seeks to be faithful to the Law. The psalmist then goes on to promise a lifetime of devotion (and not just obedience) to God’s Law, a continuing action on his part of being committed to it as well as observing it. It thus presents a profound difference between obedience and devotion, for it is his intention to keep it “with my whole heart” (vs. 34), to “delight in it” (vs. 35). The reason why one is to be devoted to the Law is that such devotion will “give me life in your ways” (vs. 37). The psalmist thus combines an intriguing combination of his own determination to keep the Law and a recognition that it requires God’s leading, instruction and commitment to him if the path of Torah is to be fully implemented in his life (vs. 35).

The psalmist further recognizes that there are temptations in his life that, if he were to yield to them, would lead him away from the Law (vss. 36-37). Therefore he prays “Turn my heart to your decrees” and “turn my eyes from looking at vanities”, so that he does not yield to “selfish gain” but rather is empowered by God to embrace authentic life in the Law.

Finally, the psalmist prays, “Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you. Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good” (vss. 38-39), and then concludes “See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life” (vs. 40). The psalmist thus admits that he lives in constant fear of discovery by God of his unworthiness in his keeping of the Law, either because he will be discovered to simply being “obedient” to the Law rather than “devoted” to it, or because he has yielded to the temptations of seeking subtly for wealth (verse 36) or for seeking power through idol worship (verse 37). Therefore, he assures God that he really does “long for your precepts” and depends upon God’s justice to “give me life” (vs. 40).

What this psalm lays out in the clearest of terms is the utter commitment of this psalmist to “works-righteousness”. That is, he perceives that he will be accepted by God only if he proves himself acceptable, whether it is by a slavish devotion to the Law or by turning his back on a pursuit for wealth or power. He acknowledges that it takes God’s grace to give him life, but he doesn’t want to depend upon it because he cannot order it. He feels safest in working for his own salvation and a life of justice – even if he fails at it (as indeed he is afraid he will). This stanza then, stands in utter distinction to the next stanza (“waw” – vss. 41-49), which places its emphasis on God’s *chesedh* love for us, not our frantic (and perhaps even manipulative) “love” for God!

Matthew 5:38-48 is the second and third of the three public commands that appear in the Sermon on the Mount. The commands (5:21-48) are all built around the formula “It has been said of old” and “But I say to you.” That is, each command presses the Mosaic Law beyond its requirements. Jesus does not abrogate these laws. He neither dismisses nor invalidates them. Rather, he both endorses them and then moves beyond them. He, in essence, makes the law harder, more comprehensive, and more demanding upon the true follower of himself and the kingdom he came to build.

The six commands that Jesus’ gives in the Sermon on the Mount using the formula “It has been said of old . . . but I say to you” are divided into two parts. The first three commands (5:21-26; 5:27-30 and 5:31-32) deal with moral or private responses to people. The final three commands of Jesus (5:33-37; 5:38-42; 5:43-48) are political or public responses to people, dealing with their ordering of public life. Followers of Jesus are involved in both a private and in a public world, acting morally and politically. Therefore, the way one chooses to act in both worlds either advances or detracts from the building of the kingdom of God. Consequently, Jesus calls upon his followers to think and act carefully so that they are living out a higher law that is consistent with the obedience of the Torah but is moving far beyond the Torah in contributing to the building of both a private and a public ethic and thus contributing to the building of the kingdom of God.

Last Sunday’s commentary on Matthew examined all three private responses, as well as the first of the three public responses. This Sunday’s commentary deals with the last two public responses.

To review last Sunday’s commentary on the first public response, Jesus commands that Christians are to not secure a commitment they have made by taking an oath in the name of God. In the ancient world, people would indicate the trustworthy and even binding nature of a promise or covenant they had made by swearing to their god or in the name of their god. That is, they indicated their honesty and/or commitment to this legal agreement by taking an oath in their god’s name (including Yahweh). But what Jesus is saying is “Don’t take an oath in the name of Yahweh, or of any other god – whether you are serving in a Roman court or making a business agreement.”

And why? Because you don’t have control over your life. And therefore you don’t have control over your oaths. All you have is the integrity of your word, of saying “yes” and then demonstrating by your faithful actions that you will do everything to keep your “yes”, or by saying “no” and being then faithful to that “no”. So, Jesus is declaring, in your dealings in the political arena, the business world, or in the celebrations of religions, become a person of your word, a person of integrity that needs no oath to demonstrate your sincerity. Instead, be a truly honest, trustworthy and upright person in all your public dealings with people. By doing so, you will be a witness to the remainder of the world of how a person acts who is part of the community of shalom, the kingdom of God. And people will both trust you and honor your God because you are showing yourself to be a trustworthy and honorable person!

5:38-42. Jesus then presents his second public command. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you” (5:38-42).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’.” Jesus begins this second public command by quoting Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20 or Deuteronomy 19:21, all of which make the same demand. This is the law of retaliation, acted upon frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible. When we initially look at it, it seems both arbitrary and violent. But in reality, the law of retaliation was created in order to limit violence!

This limitation of violence is magnificently presented in the Leviticus passage. “Anyone who kills a human being such be put to death”, the Law states. “Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; *the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered*. You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen, for I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 24:17-22). What the Law is carefully doing is to limit the response one can make to violence done against one. “The injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered”. Without such a command, the tendency is always to *escalate* violence, so that what is visited upon the perpetrator is greater force than what he had earlier committed. That, in turn, brings a greater response which then results in a return response of even greater violence. If the Arabic-Israeli or the terrorist/U.S. response is about anything, it has been about the natural tendency to keep on escalating violence. Thus, this Law – while seeming brutal – in reality was intended as a good law which limited the response only to the violence perpetrated against that person.

But this law was not good enough for Jesus. He takes the public response to one’s enemies a step further. “But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer’” (5:39a). But what does Jesus mean by this surprising (and seemingly victimizing) command?

The problem with Jesus’ command as initially translated in the King James Version and then picked up by all other translations that are built off that Authorized Version (e.g., the NKJ, RSV, NRSV, ESV) is that it ambiguously translates the original Greek. The key words of this verse, *me antistenai*, are better translated “do not set yourself against” (NEB), “do not take revenge on” (TEV), “do not engage in violent retaliation”¹ or even “do not ever try to get even with”². In other words, what Jesus is actually saying in this passage is “Do not use violence to resist an evildoer”.³ I love the unique twist Dale Bruner puts on it, “The idea (of the Greek) is this: Our immediate reaction to ill-treatment from an “evil one” will be “Get even!” “Pay back!” Jesus’ counsel, on the contrary is “Don’t! Be more creative! Surprise him!”⁴

¹ Stassen, Glen. *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 91.

² Bruner, F. Dale. *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 248.

³ Carter, Warren, “The Gospel of Matthew”, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), p. 1756.

⁴ Bruner, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

That this is the correct translation of Jesus' command is made clear by Jesus' ensuing elaboration of his point. How are you followers of Jesus going to surprise those seeking to do evil to you? "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (vss. 39b-41).

It isn't that you are going to allow yourself to be walked all over! It isn't that you are going to be passive to "the evil one's" aggression. It isn't that you aren't going to resist his attack against you. It is that you have another alternative than retribution. The only alternatives aren't simply retribution or compliance. There is a third alternative – an alternative that virtually assures you victory every time it is used. So "surprise him" with the third alternative – the Jesus alternative. And what is that alternative? Jesus' gives three examples.

First, "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also". To truly understand this command, one must recognize that in Israelite society, no one ever used his left hand (this is true in many cultures even to today) in his interaction with people. The reason why was that the left hand was used to wipe one's self after having a bowel movement or performing any other "dirty" or potentially disease-spreading task. And since neither soap nor toilet paper had yet been invented, one could only wipe one's self by using the hand and then rinsing it in water. *No one* – neither Roman nor Greek nor Arabic nor Jew – would ever think in terms of using his left hand for anything in public life (which is why, even to today, we raise our right hand when swearing an oath, military personnel salute with the right hand, and educators discourage people writing with their left hand)!

So, when Jesus said, "If anyone strikes you on the *right* cheek", he was saying something quite obvious to his listeners (but not to us). There was only one way one could strike someone on the right cheek. He would have to use the right hand. So to strike a person on the right hand would mean striking the person *with the back of the hand!* Slapping with the back of the hand was the supreme insult to a person's honor. The person being so insulted doesn't even deserve a good solid punch! The one so struck receives the indignity of the back of his opponent's hand.

So, how do you respond to such an insult? If you don't care about the law, you respond with a good solid punch in the chops! If you have no guts, you meekly take it (which is how the KJV and most Christians interpret Jesus' response). But if you are an authentic follower of Christ, you surprise your opponent! You turn to him the left cheek (in essence, daring him, "Go ahead and punch me – punch me on the other cheek"). The result will be utter confusion on the part of your opponent. He won't know what to do, and he will likely be thoroughly "faked-out" and even embarrassed in front of all those watching the incident. You have responded, you have responded forcefully, but you have not responded violently! And your opposition won't know what to do!

Jesus gives a second example. "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well" (5:40). The Law specifically prohibits against suing for a person's coat (Exodus 22:26-27; Deut. 24:12-13; Amos 2:8). The coat was the only article of clothing that could not be taken from the person. A "coat" was actually a long shirt, sort of like a man's nightgown that covered his body. If a person was so destitute that the only thing he had to take away to pay a debt was

the shirt that covered his nakedness, you couldn't take that item from him (you could sue for his sandals, his head covering, even an outer cloak – but not his coat (or shirt). ‘It may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as a cover. In what else shall that person sleep’ (Exod. 22:27)?

So the greedy lender, because he can't sue you for your coat, sues you for your shirt. What should you do? You could oppose him in the court – but, in the final analysis, you would lose. You could refuse to surrender your shirt, and things would get violent. You could meekly surrender your shirt (if you followed Jesus seeming advice). Or you could surprise him. You could take off your shirt, give it to him, and then strip off your coat (that is, that which “cloaks” you), so that you are standing before him and the entire court bare-naked. Then who would be embarrassed? Who would be exposed as totally greedy? Who would win the scorn of the community? It wouldn't be you. You would win the community's sympathy. It would be the person who had brought you to such straits!

Jesus moves to his third example. “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile” (5:41). As part of the occupying army, a Roman soldier -- and only a Roman soldier – was legally permitted to force a citizen of that conquered country to shoulder his pack and walk one mile with it. But under Roman law, that soldier could not force that citizen to carry the pack further. Instead, he had to commandeer another citizen. This is what Jesus is referring to here.

What Jesus says is “The way to resist this act of oppression is to surprise the soldier. Volunteer to walk a second mile with him, carrying his pack. This will change the entire dynamics of the situation. As Stassen so beautifully puts it, “Jesus does not say, ‘Do what he is forcing you to do, comply with oppression, and live with powerless resentment.’ Instead, he teaches us to do something at our own initiative, under our own power, something that we are not forced to do, something surprising that is in itself a form of resistance. It is a nonviolent initiative that confronts the injustice. It shifts from resentful powerlessness to the power of our own surprising initiative, which also calls our adversary to a new level of consciousness of what he or she is doing”.⁵

In reality, what Jesus is teaching in these examples of his command is a third way of dealing with oppression and exploitation. You can rebel against it, but if the oppressor has all the economic, religious or military power on his side, you are inviting your destruction. You can comply with the demand, but this will eventually destroy your spirit. Or you can surprise the opposition by acting in a way that holds them up to public ridicule or rejection or even convicts them of their own wrong-doing.

What is particularly significant about these three situations that Jesus uses here to illustrate his point, “Do not use violence to resist an evildoer” is that Jesus has picked three common incidents that the people experienced everyday in which the systems and their elite would oppress, exploit and control the people. What Jesus, in reality, is doing in this command is to communicate to the people that they both have the right and the capacity to knock the systems off-balance by using nonviolent resistance, and that a people consistently knocking the systems off-balance will eventually bring about change. Why? Because the systems and their elites won't be able to continue to cope with such people action.

⁵ Stassen, *op.cit.*, p. 93.

But how can we say that these three illustrations are an intentional attack against the religious, economic and political systems? Well, look at the illustrations Jesus chose. In the first (turning the left cheek to receive a second slap), the reality in Jesus' day was that the only person who would dare to give a backhand slap to someone would be his supposed superior. Thus, it is the elite treating the poor in a condescending manner, and this would be particularly true of the religious establishment. Therefore, Jesus is using this illustration to attack the religious elite that controlled the lives of the Jewish people. In the second illustration (suing for one's shirt off one's back), the only person who could loan money in Israel – and thus, could sue – would be one of the economic elite. Thus, this is an intentional attack against both the wealthy and those who managed Israel's economic system. In the final illustration (walking two rather than one mile), it is the Roman occupying army and, consequently, the political-military complex of the Roman Empire (which included Israel) whom Jesus is attacking. And in each illustration, he is recommending that the people resist the exploitation and oppression of these three systems, but to do so in such a way that the systems are constantly thrown off-balance and don't know how to respond. By doing so, one weakens those systems and increasingly brings them to compromise, good-faith negotiation or collapse.

5:43-48. Jesus now moves to his final command regarding moving beyond the Law. He teaches, “You have heard that it was 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, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:43-48).

This is the only command that does not quote directly the Old Testament. There is no place in the Hebrew Bible where it is commanded, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy”. The closest statement is one found in the Qumran community.

But the Hebrew Bible does have passages in it that are certainly not loving toward the enemy. Consider these scriptures: “The righteous will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps. 58:10) or “May the wicked man's children be orphans, and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit” (Ps. 109:9-10) or “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with a perfect hatred; I count them my enemies” (Ps. 139:21-22). There are certainly enough passages of such animosity that one could easily summarize the commandment as “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy”.

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. What is particularly significant about this command of Jesus and all the ensuing exposition on it is that *all the verbs in Matthew 5:44-48 are plural!* Not one is singular! Jesus is not saying, “You, Christian, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. He is saying, “You people – love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you people!” Jesus is stating that the task of the church is to love even those who most viciously oppose them – even to the extent of

publicly praying for them in their worship. And this, according to the almost-contemporary Polycarp (c. 69-155) was exactly what the earliest Christians did in their public worship. They prayed for their enemies, and prayed for them by name. And they didn't pray that God would "bathe (the Christian's) feet in the blood of the wicked"! They prayed for their enemies' well-being and for their salvation; they wished only the best for their enemies. Would we pray for terrorists that way at Sunday worship today?

Jesus calls upon his followers to love those who hate them. Jesus calls on the church to see no one who opposes or persecutes them as an enemy, but rather to fervently desire God's best for them. We have the responsibility to contend for the truth, to oppose ungodly doctrine and to seek the "purity" of the church. But we also have the responsibility to love those who teach such doctrine and even lead others astray, for only by being a community of love can we live out the "unity" and "peace" of the church. Thus, although the doctrinal differences were worth arguing over, "when Santa Claus punched Arius in the mouth",⁶ that was inappropriate Christianity!

When writing about the necessity for Christian love even of the enemy, Bruner differentiates the issue in a magnificent way. He wrote, "We are not asked to love the enemies' *character* or *deeds* or *teachings* or anything else *about* them; we are asked only to love *the enemies themselves*. All their hurtful emotions, words and acts are hateful both to the living God and to human conscience. But does God hate *the persons*? Some biblical texts admittedly suggest that God does. But we will learn from Jesus that God has and shows a remarkably impartial love even to evil people".⁷

And what is that remarkably impartial love? "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same" (5:45b-47)?

Jesus makes an unusual combination of comparisons at this point. First, he points out the evenhanded nature of God's love. God doesn't love some because they are good or even because they have been responsive to God's grace. Nor does God hate some because they are evil or unreceptive to God's grace. God loves all people equally. And the proof of this equal love is an equal distribution by God of God's resources. God's natural resources are distributed as evenhandedly to evil as well as good people. One is not preferred above the other. This equitable distribution is proof positive, Jesus contends, that God loves those who choose to be enemies of God every bit as much as he loves those closest to God. Therefore – and here's the real point of Jesus' command – Jesus is not asking his followers to do anything that God himself doesn't do daily! God loves God's enemies. And so should we!

⁶ At the First Council of Nicaea (called by the Emperor Constantine to resolve the debate of the church over the divinity of Christ), Nicholas of Myra (who was the "St. Nicholas" who became the basis for the myth of Santa Claus) became so enraged with Arius' and his attack against the divinity of Christ (even to the extent of singing blasphemous songs), that Nicholas was unable to tolerate the mocking of Jesus and stood up and punched Arius in the mouth! I wrote a sermon about this incident (built on this Sunday's Gospel text) entitled "When Santa Claus Punched Arius in the Mouth!"

⁷ Bruner, *op.cit.*, p. 272.

In this unusual combination of comparisons and based upon his contention that God loves everybody the same, Jesus then moves to his second point. What have you accomplished in loving those people who love you? What's the big deal in that? "Even the tax collectors do the same". Even those who collaborate with Rome and with the Temple elite to rob and rule and rape Israel love those who love them. "And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?" Even Gentiles, even pagans, even people who know nothing and have nothing to do with God love each other and greet and care for those who are their kith and kin. But to care deeply for and about someone who despises you – well, that's an entirely different matter. And that is what the church ought to be about!

Jesus has now completed his sixth commandment. He has now stated his updated, new Law. But now he wishes to summarize all that he has been talking about since the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. So he summarizes it with magnificent words that also tend to be among the most misunderstood words in the Bible. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

What does Jesus mean by "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect"? First, the sentence opens with the word "hymeis", the plural form of the word "you". So it should be translated "You people", rather than to be excluded all together from the translation (as it is now). Second, the word translated "be" is actually the future tense of that verb in Greek, so that it actually says "shall be". That tense makes the word both a promise and a command. It is a promise of what Christ, working in and through us as a community of faith, will do. But it is also a command – this is what we are to be about doing! Therefore, this verse should begin "You people are going to be" rather than simply the word "be" as a command!

Then comes the most important word in this verse. "You people are going to be a mature people". The Greek word translated here as "perfect" is the word, "teleioi". It is most often translated "perfect". But in English, the word "perfect" has come to mean "faultless", "flawless", "ideal", "unequaled", "complete". But in Jesus' day, this Greek word was used for people who had come of age, had become adults, who are mature rather than a child. Therefore, the word really means "mature". And if it is so used in this scripture passage, it makes far more sense than does our English word "perfect".

"You people (you, the church) are going to be a mature people, just as your heavenly Father is mature"! Now, this makes a whole lot more sense! Jesus is calling the church to grow up, and to become a mature people – a tested, wise, stable, prudent, judicious people. This is what these six commands from Jesus are supposed to accomplish. If they are followed by the church, then God's people will become a mature people who will be equipped to live out an alternative lifestyle in the world that will turn the world upside down! That is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about!

I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 continue Paul's effort to bring some perspective to the divisions within the Corinthian church. In last Sunday's text, he pointed out the foolishness of party spirit, demonstrating that those whom each party elevates in reality saw themselves as a common team working together for the advance of the gospel in Corinth. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God

gave the growth”, Paul writes, likening himself and Apollos to gardeners, seeking to make the church as fertile as possible. But he also points out that all they could do was to encourage the growth. For it was God who “gave the growth”, whether Apollos or he were successful at their work or not. Now, in today’s Epistle Lesson, Paul changes the metaphor but continues to make his point.

“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. . . . Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (4:10-11, 16-17).

The vast majority of the members of the Church in Corinth were not Jews, but were Greeks and former pagans instead. They had come to Christ, not with the rich heritage of Hebrew belief and culture but from that of the Greek culture which knew only of a pantheon of gods who were little more than “super-humans”, with all the character traits and all the peccadilloes of human beings.

It is important to keep in mind that the “temple” to which Paul refers in this passage is not the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem but a Greek temple to one of its local deities. And the “building” to which Paul’s likens the church is such a temple complex in the city of Corinth.

The primary temple in Corinth was the immense Temple of Apollo. Initially constructed in the sixth century BC, it had been destroyed several times, with its most recent reconstruction being in the first Christian century. The temple faced onto the Roman Agora or market square. Across from that temple was a “bema” or platform meant to be reminiscent of the temple façade, with the Agora lying between the bema and the Temple of Apollo.

The bema was impressive. It consisted of a very broad and deep platform, surrounded on three sides by benches, and behind the center benches, a miniaturized façade of the Temple of Apollo (which the bema faced). The entire superstructure was built of white and blue marble, and was the primary platform from which political leaders and religious teachers spoke. Whereas it is uncertain when in the first century the Temple of Apollo was rebuilt, there is no question that the bema was built in 44 AD, just before this letter to the Corinthian Church was written. It would make perfectly-good sense for Paul to refer to the construction of the bema in his letter, since all of Corinth’s attention would be on its erection (much as we will stand across from a public building being constructed, watching the work from which a striking building will eventually emerge).

When Paul wrote, “Like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it”, everyone in the Corinthian church thought of the construction of the bema and the reconstruction of the Temple of Apollo. They all knew two facts about such great public works. First, the foundation was everything! Without the capacity to build with a steel framework, everyone knew that the entire integrity of the building was determined by the solidity of the foundation. With a weak foundation, the building – whether a temple or a bema – would collapse with the first earthquake (of which there were many), or would be eroded by the first

major storm or flood (which were frequent). Second, no master builder constructed an entire public building. The foundation specialist would build the foundation; the building specialist would build its walls and pillars; the roof specialist would build the roof. Therefore, everyone got Paul's point. Paul was the foundation specialist, Apollos the building specialist, and perhaps a pastor yet to come would be the roof specialist. Each had his job to do, and each specialized in that job. But the foundation was everything!

Then Paul drives home the analogy by speaking of the great Temple of Apollos, which was the *pieces de resistance* of the agora (and of which every Corinthian was justly proud). "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (vss. 16-17)!

Every Christian who was a former pagan knew exactly to what Paul was referring. All pagans believed that in a temple the "spirit" of that god lived. Thus, the Temple of Apollos was occupied by the "spirit" of Apollos, and people came to that temple to worship that "spirit". Thus, Paul now reminds the Corinthian Christians that they are a living temple of God, and God's spirit dwells in that temple! So if you belittle, mock, criticize, undermine or destroy a Christian, God will be angry and will "destroy" you. You can't hurt a child of God, and get away with it! For in hurting a child of God, you are doing irreparable harm to yourself! Therefore, when you say "I am of Apollos" and reject your sister and brother Christians whose allegiance is to Cephas or to Paul, you are defacing the "temple" God is seeking to build to God's glory here in the city of Corinth. And God notes your defacement – and God doesn't forget!

Paul continues. "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness,' and again, 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'. So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God" (3:18-23)!

So, Corinthian Christians, wise up! There is false wisdom. And there is authentic wisdom. Don't make the mistake of thinking you are authentically wise when, in reality, you are not. The difference between authentic and false wisdom is captured in the two different ways the English language refers to people. There are wise people! And then there are wise guys! The difference is significant. A "wise guy" is one who thinks he knows everything; you can't tell him anything. The nature of such certitude in your own beliefs and convictions is captured in the saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts!" And a "wise guy" is, by his very nature, disputatious. That is, he cannot keep silent and learn from another. To even pretend to learn from another would be to expose one's own vulnerability and uncertainty. A wise guy, by his very nature, is never humble; he must prove he is right. As one friend of mine put it about another friend, "The more wrong he is, the louder he shouts!"

A wise person, on the other hand, is a person who is not infatuated with her own knowledge, but is always ready to learn. Therefore, she listens, she considers, she weighs arguments, and she is

characteristically cautious about making a final decision. She is, by her very nature, deliberative. So become a wise person rather than a wise guy, Paul encourages the Corinthians. Stop being decisive, seeking to push only your own position. Learn from the wisdom of others, particularly those with whom you disagree. Listen and learn and be receptive. And from that vantage-point, share your convictions about Christ with others, while giving them the dignity of respecting their convictions, as well.

Thus, Paul ends his argument with memorable words. “Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (3:21-23). When you claim a Christian party for your allegiance, whether it is a person, a denomination or a theological position (I remember a pastor once saying to me, “I’m a Presbyterian first and a Christian second”!), you have sold yourself as a slave to that person, group or position. But it should be the other way around. Are you a “Christ-one” (the meaning of the word “Christian”) or not? In reality, Paul is saying, each Christian and the Christian community is master rather than slave, because he and they have given themselves to Christ and Christ belongs to God. As Barclay so magnificently states it, “The Christian who gives his strength and his heart to some little splinter of a party has surrendered everything to a petty thing, when he could have entered into possession of a fellowship and a love as wide as the universe. He has confined into narrow limits a life which should be limitless in its outlook”.⁸

So Apollos or Cephas or Paul first and then Christ? Presbyterian or Roman Catholic or Baptist first, and then Christian? Reformed theology or Thomistic theology or Arminian theology first, and then Christian faith? Hardly! “All (these things) belong to you, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God!” And that ends the matter!

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⁸ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 35.