**Matthew 5: 31-48 Living as God lives**

Last week we looked at the first two antitheses found in Matthew 5 where Jesus says words to the effect of ‘You have heard it said…but I say to you…! - today we look at the remaining 4, **beginning in verses 31 & 32** where we read: *It has been said ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who married a divorced woman commits adultery.*

In the ancient world and we’re talking about back to the time of Moses (over 3200 years ago!), divorce was already a widespread phenomenon in the known world. In response God instituted some regulations surrounding divorce that were designed with three things to mind: First, to protect the sanctity of marriage from indecency;

Second, to protect the woman from a husband who might simply send her away without any cause (such as spoiling a meal!);

Third, to formally document the woman as a legitimately divorced woman, so that she was not thought of as a harlot.

By the time of Jesus, the sanctity of marriage had largely been lost. Whereas God had intended Marriage to be a permanent union, the practice of divorce in the world resulted in marriages being torn apart, destroying so many lives in the process and leaving many with unresolved anger. In response, Jesus, in this passage and other passages in the Gospels seeks to recapture the true heart of what marriage is all about, focusing on what marriage is about, rather than divorce, whilst acknowledging circumstances where marriages do fail.

The key to this passage lies in verse 32 *But I tell you that anyone who divorce his wife, except for sexual immorality.* The Greek word used for *sexual immorality* here is [*por knee a]* *porneia*, which unlike other more specific words used in the NT to describe this act, can be better understood as it was rendered in the earlier NIV translations as ‘marital unfaithfulness’. This broader term includes any act, ranging from sexual infidelity to abusive partners to any act of a partner who does something to harm their partner. Instead of looking to their best interests, they look to harm them. These are the situations in which Jesus still permits divorce when the institution and intention of marriage is not honoured.

Where possible, Jesus wants people to work through such situations rather than face divorce, because divorce results in pain and suffering.

**The fourth antithesis** focuses not on a command, but the widely used practise of making oaths. As we read in verse 33 *Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfil to the Lord the oaths you have made.’*

On Oaths, Wilkins in his commentary writes (p247): *In the Old Testament, God often guaranteed the fulfilment of his promises with an oath. In the same way, the Old Testament permitted a person to swear by the name of God to substantiate an important affirmation or promise. An oath or vow helped a person remain faithful to commitments.*

By the time of Jesus, people had found so many loopholes, for example if a person wasn’t really serious about an oath, they could swear by less sacred things such as by earth or by Jerusalem, so they wouldn’t suffer any consequences. This completely devalued both the purpose of oaths and the point of making an oath, so Jesus responds by saying one shouldn’t swear at all when seeking to guarantee the truth of what they are saying. Instead, people should strive, as Wilkins says, t*o be people of such integrity of character and truthfulness of heart that whatever they say is absolutely believable and dependable. A person of integrity is one who in daily conversation is so truthful, dependable, genuine, guileless, and reliable that his or her words are believed without an oath. In other words, a simple ‘Yes or No’ should be enough for a trustworthy person!*

Are you known as a person of your word?

**The fifth antithesis** we read in verse 38-39 says *You have heard that it was said ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.*

The origins of this saying finds its roots in the ancient world where some societies handed out punishments without regard for individual cases - often the penalty far exceeded the crime. In response, this, the law of retaliation was established to ensure the punishment fitted the crime and wasn’t exceeded.

About this saying, Kalland writes (p248 Wilkins) *Most commentators doubt that it was intended to be applied literally in every case, but it was a graphic metaphor to establish equivalence of loss in a given circumstance.*

Wilkins sums this up saying *the law was intended as an equaliser of justice.*

Furthermore, it was intended that all punishments were to be imposed and carried out by civil authorities and civil courts to protect all parties involved and guard against any private revenge crusades. This was easier said than done! You see, by the time of Jesus’s day, the Jews had experienced much turmoil, due to being subjected to the rule of the Roman Empire. Jewish leaders had little or no power to execute justice for their people. This led to various popular resistance movements against the Romans springing up throughout the land.

Within this oppressive atmosphere, Jesus focuses on the motivation of people who have been taken advantage of and wronged. Rather than retaliating, Jesus says the wronged person should instead seek to serve them and go ‘the extra mile’. Jesus gives four examples of this.

The first in v39 concerns when people have been insulted. They are not to respond with like for like - rather by not responding and turning the other cheek, they will be able to serve the perpetrator.

The second example in v40 concerns when one seeks to take one’s shirt. This refers to a legal setting where someone is suing a person. Rather than only giving them what they are demanding, they are to give them even more.

The third example in v41 concerns going the extra mile. This example refers to the then military practice where military personnel could requisition your help without notice. Instead of just doing what they ask, Jesus says do twice as much as they have asked!

The final example in v42, relates to those people one feels uncomfortable around - one is to both give and lend as requested, even when it is inconvenient. Generosity is what Jesus is encouraging here, even when there is little or no hope of repayment.

This is the kind of life we are called to live - one that seeks to serve everyone around us, rather than seeking to retaliate. Do you dare to ask yourself how you can serve those around you more, especially those who make you feel uncomfortable? In a sense, this change of lifestyle we are being called to live, prepares us **for the final antithesis** in v43-45 where we read *You have heard that it was said ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*

This would have sounded topsy Turvey to Jesus’ listeners because it reversed everything they had lived for. So what does this mean?

On the surface of it, loving your neighbour appears to be straight forward especially as it is what embodies 6 of the 10 commandments and was also the second greatest commandment, quoted by Jesus after loving God with all of our being. Unfortunately over time, it had become a common practice for people to distort its true meaning by seeking to define more narrowly who their neighbour was, hence the question from the expert in the law (Luke 10: 25-37) to Jesus. Some wanted this to mean only the people they loved and liked to be around, whereas to Jesus, neighbours referred to everyone you came into contact with!

When we come to the saying that one should hate their enemies, did you know that this is not found in the Old Testament anywhere. What happened over time is that people interpreted the fact that God hated evil as meaning one should hate their enemies too, but this is not what God ever meant. As the old saying goes ‘God loves the sinner, but hates the sin.’ Yes God hates evil but he is the God of reconciliation because he loves all people - his mission has always been for people of all nations to come to a living faith in him.

We see this starting to be worked out in the book of Acts (and in our last sermon series) where the early church had to grapple with its ever changing identity, especially when they saw Gentiles (who were considered to be the enemy by some Jews) coming to faith. The Jews learned that loving your enemy was about learning to love all whom God has created, including Gentiles and the Roman Empire!

Today, our response to those who persecute us needs to be one of love and prayer, Why? So that they would discover God’s amazing love for them, for when we learn to live lives that love and pray for all, we discover that our own lives are transformed into Christ’s likeness.

Our lifelong goal should be to live like Jesus - he who is perfect in every way will bring about his good and perfect work in our lives so we become more like him with every passing day. The question is do we want to learn to be perfect as God is?