“Turn the other cheek!” Reflections on Matthew 5:38-48

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What does the life of faith mean amid the realities of human life and human conflicts? This passage is one of the best known and least understood. It has both inspired and alienated by its apparent idealism. It belongs to the Sermon on the Mount, a composition created by the author of the Gospel according to Matthew who probably wrote in a context where the disciple Matthew had been known and influential. We follow the (misleading) convention of referring to the author therefore as “Matthew”.

Matthew wrote in the 80s CE, around half a century after Jesus, using Mark as his base, which had been composed from disparate largely oral traditions about 15 years earlier. Matthew mostly followed the narrative order in which Mark strung this material together, though at times he reworked or changed it for greater effect. Apart from Mark, like Luke, he also had a written collection of sayings of Jesus, commonly called “Q” (=German “Quelle” meaning “Source”). Within Q there was a set of sayings of Jesus, preserved in an earlier form in Luke 6:20-49, which Matthew took and expanded. He located it in a mountain scene, to recall Moses, and made it the opening scene of Jesus’ ministry, thus creating the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 - 7. Similarly in Matthew 8 – 9 he collected typical deeds of Jesus. The result is that he presents a mini-gospel right at the beginning in which key teachings and deeds are presented. Matthew was ensuring that people would receive a very clear message about what it means to live the faith right at the beginning.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with promises, known as the beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor … the hungry …” Originally promises to people in need, they have been reworked in Matthew to serve also as a challenge to believers to live in solidarity with the poor, to hunger and thirst for justice (not just for themselves but for others) and to be peacemakers and much more. Matthew portrays Jesus as insisting that faith does not mean setting aside the commandments but taking them even more seriously than they were heard before. He illustrates this in 5:21-48 by addressing 6 topics, neatly grouped into two lots of three, each introduced with “You have heard it was said”. Topics 1 -4 are about hate (not just murder); adulterous attitudes (not just acts); divorce (against it abuse); straight talk rather than manipulation through oaths. Topics 5 and 6, retaliation and loving one’s enemies, are the focus of today’s reading.

Topic 5 takes us straight into the personal: turning the other cheek, giving up your clothes, going the extra mile, and giving rather than lending. They are all about resistance when set upon by demands. The most likely setting is life in the totalitarian regime of the Roman empire especially under its puppet rulers in Palestine. The best strategy when set upon by such behaviour was to go along with it, not fight it. Forcing people to accompany (and serve) the military was common. Imposing armies on locals led to widespread abuse. It does not, however, mean surrendering the gospel’s subversive message which declared the superiority of God’s reign rather than Rome’s. It means being realistic.

Taken out of its likely context these instructions have created considerable confusion, especially when treated as universal rules. Already “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is open to misunderstanding. Here it is about fighting back, retaliation: give as good as you get. Hit back! That’s how some people had come to read these words. Originally they expressed a legal principle which still governs order in our society. Where wrong has been done there should be equivalent
compensation as assessed by a court of law. You steal a cow? Then you must restore it or restore what it is worth.

When taken out of context this passage has been read as demanding that people suffering abuse should not speak up, but turn the other cheek and put up with it – a reading with tragic consequences, including in relation to domestic violence, for instance. It is also the passage cited in favour of pacifism. That, too, has needed to be revisited. The instructions here relate only to incidents where an individual is put upon by another. What happens when we are neither the perpetrator nor the victim but the concerned onlooker? It is then often necessary to intervene to protect others against abuse. One needs a police force with power to restrain physically where necessary. The passage is not addressing what to do when third parties are victims. It is, however, too easy to dismiss the passage altogether in relation to major conflict such as war. We go to war, it is asserted, to protect third parties, the so-called “just war”. It is certainly thinkable that, like the police, a person or community might need to forcibly resist violence, but frequently that can be avoided and should be and some of the wisdom behind such reticence derives from this passage, but especially from topic 6, loving one’s enemy.

Underlying all 6 topics is the insistence that every human person is of value. No one is to be written off. It is significant that the last and first topics match. Topic 1 is about not harbouring anger, in other words, hate; and topic 6 is about love not hate. This throws light on topic 5 as well. There is no place for hateful retaliation, such as might misuse “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” as its justification. That includes: no hate in war. Some people love to hate and define their identity by differentiating the people they love and admire from those they hate or despise. Sometimes media reports of people who have committed crime play on hate, especially when they interview victims’ families after a court case or report release of a prisoner. Writing people off justified capital punishment. Valuing every person is now enshrined internationally in the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. The kind of love promoted by Jesus went beyond rights to address needs.

Topic 6 is also not without its problems. Nowhere does Jewish scripture enjoin hating enemies; and while loving one’s neighbour meant primarily loving one’s fellow Jew, many realised that it needed to be universal. On the other hand in both the Old and New Testaments one could find instances where hating enemies seems to be promoted or modelled, including in the Psalms but also in images of God, especially those which depict God as eventually punishing unbelievers with interminable torture and violence, a notion which once energised evangelism. Matthew’s strongly Jewish context is reflected in the “put down” of non-Jews: even they love their own; you’ve got to do better than them (because you are better than them!). Then there is the question of reward: do we love only so we will be rewarded? Being loved by someone only because they are serving their own self-interest is not a pleasant experience. Matthew’s Jesus takes us beyond that, however, but also has no compunction about the assertion that loving others is of course rewarding, good both for us and for them. We might also hesitate at the comment that God sends rain on the just and unjust – unless we convert it into something which says: in God’s creation there are no such barriers. We all belong together, not an irrelevant reflection in relation to climate change. We are all in it together.

The impact of our passage is undone for many people by its final demand: “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (5:48). Few will claim perfection – and are very annoying and unconvincing when they do! – and most resign to the fact that it is impossible. All this is a
misunderstanding of Matthew. Matthew is not making impossible demands – what use would that be? To make people feel guilty? Two things bring the statement down to earth. Matthew has reformulated what he found in his source, Q: “Be merciful/compassionate as you Father in merciful/compassionate” (preserved in Luke 6:36). While using different words the emphasis in Matthew’s context shows that love and compassion towards one’s fellows is still the focus. Secondly, Matthew’s word for “perfect” also means “mature/grown up” (as in his playful revision of Jesus’ encounter with the rich man (19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22). While one cannot apply this to God, it is nevertheless clear that Matthew’s focus is not a statistical, quantitative perfection, but a qualitative one. It is about wholeness. Let your whole being love – towards God, towards yourself, towards others! Let God be truly God for you and if God is love, love is then going to be in a process of perfecting itself in and through you. 1 John 4:16-19 uses similar language, focusing on the way such love gives one confidence both in one’s relation to God and in one’s relationship to others and grounds it in the fact that God first loved us. Love, being loved, opening oneself to it, generates love. For Matthew this is at the core of Jesus’ teaching and of scripture and so informs every aspect of human behaviour.

That love is there for us and still generates its fruit if we will open ourselves to it.