

“Be different, be perfect” Mat 5:38-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Today for our meditation we have a fragment from the Sermon on the Mount. These verses come from the section of the sermon which deals with the Old Testament laws and how Jesus reinterpreted them.

When we read these words we have to remember to whom Jesus is telling them. They are not given as instructions to obtain salvation. Not at all. Then they would be useless.

They are given as instruction to those to whom salvation is granted as a gift. As it was granted to you, when you were baptized, when God the Father adopted you into His family. It didn't matter what you were and what had you done, Now, when you are His child, these words apply to you, too.

We have two of these saying 'you have heard that it was said', and two 'but I say to you'. The scary part in these saying is that Jesus is not just sharing His thoughts about this life, but He is actually commanding us to live according His words. And words which we read today are heavy ones, if we take them seriously.

First of commands is about not resisting evil. And as if this was not enough the second one is about loving our enemies. What we'll do today, we will take a look at these words of Jesus step by step and will try to understand what exactly He is commanding us, both in relation of not resisting evil and loving our enemies. At the conclusion we'll meditate a little on how can we possibly keep these commands.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" Perhaps this is one of the most misunderstood verses of the Bible. How do we understand them? Popular explanation would be, - what they did to us, we should do to them.

If they spoke harshly with us, we should repay with the same. If they hit us, we should hit them. If they slandered us, we should slander them, and so on. Whatever they did to us, we should do to them.

But this is a total misinterpretation of the meaning of this verse. This verse appears several times in the Old Testament, and it's intention is not to promote a revenge. Quite contrary, its intention is to prevent a revenge.

How do we want to react when someone does something unpleasant to us? You can see it the most clearly with children. What happens when someone pushes you, or hits, or calls names? We want to repay it, right away, and not just to repay, but repay in a way that others would regret what they did. To repay in double, or in triple, if we can.

The rule 'Eye for an eye' had two functions. First, to secure that revenge doesn't exceed the harm done, to prevent unrestricted revenge when we want to make our offenders to regret it forever. This rule was given to help to restrict a violence.

Second, this rule was meant to establish justice between different social groups. You know that what the poor get punished for, the rich can get away. And again, if a poor guys has offended the rich, he may suffer all the fires of hell, not just 'eye for an eye', but if situation is vice versa, the rich can get away. Thus this rule was given to maintain justice.

Jesus takes this rule and overwrites it, "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Are you serious Jesus? Do you expect us to live like this? These may have been questions of Jesus listeners. We can definitely ask the same. Really? Jesus examples may be a bit shocking, but what He requires is a change of our attitude.

Instead of looking for revenge, let us try as apostle Paul wrote, "to overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:21) For by fighting evil with evil we just multiply it.

But still this 'turning the other cheek' thing? Isn't it weird? Again, it isn't what we usually think it is. Most of the people are right handed. Now think, how can you slap other person's right cheek? With backhand.

It is a slap, not a hit. It is not being under attack physically, but being insulted. It goes together with other examples. Give your coat, walk two miles, give whoever asks you. They are realistic examples from Jesus time, when Roman soldiers could ask you to give away your possessions, and even your time.

What Jesus demands is to follow Him. Be naïve in your humility, overcome evil with good, be overly generous, let others to take advantage of you, for you know that

this is how Jesus responded to those who reviled Him, and with His humility He obtained salvation for us.

But then Jesus continues with something even harder. “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Are you kidding?

First, we need to state, that this is not a quote from the Old Testament. Nowhere in the Bible we are encouraged to hate our enemies. It isn't some obsolete OT teaching. We are encouraged to hate evil, injustice, and so, yes! but not humans, created in the image of God.

To be able to comprehend what Jesus is asking we need to re-examine our understanding about this world. This world, entire creation is created good, even very good (Gen 1:31). It refers to every human being that comes into this world. We all are created in God's own image and are infinitely precious in His eyes.

But at the same time, we are all born as sinners. Sin permeates us through and through. There is nothing in us that isn't corrupted by sin. We need restoration. We need to be purified from our sin, renewed into goodness of God's creation.

That's what God's plan is all about. About the restoration of goodness of entire creation. That's why Jesus came. That's what we are called to do. To discern between goodness of our fellow creatures and corruption of sin. We are called to love God's creation, and to work hard to restore its goodness.

When we live this way, we, indeed, resemble our God. For He as the Creator, continues to provide for everyone ‘for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.’ As the Redeemer He came and lied down His life. For whom? For His friends? No, for all of us, when we still were His enemies.

Think for a while about this loving enemies and not repaying with evil. Are there such a thing as enemies? Yes and no. We can say that there are those who treat us so badly that we can consider them enemies. But why do they do it? Do they do it as good creatures of God, as created in His image, redeemed by Christ?

Or do they do it as slaves of sin, enslaved by their own passions, corrupted by society, rejecting the love of God and His wisdom to see what miserable life they are living. Even if they act as our enemies, what they really deserve - is our pity.

They also are God's creatures. Jesus died for them, too. God the Father desires them all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. They all are as our lost brothers and sisters. Beloved and dear, just lost for now.

If we repay evil with evil? What motivates us? The Father's will? Not at all. If we don't see that they are poor slaves of sin and want to repay with evil, then we act not as children of God, but as slaves of sin ourselves. Then sin has gained mastery over us as well. We have allowed it.

Besides, if we repay to the poor sinner, whom we'll harm? Will we harm the sin that enslaves them, or the devil who mocks them? None of them... we'll harm a good creature of God.

Who is a winner? We? No! Other person? No? Who is a winner? Sin and devil... and both sides involved in a conflict are victims. That's how it works.

That's what Jesus wants us to understand. We are not fighting against flesh, but against evil spirits and powers of darkness. And if we do what they want us to do, we all lose... we all lose. But if we overcome evil with good, we all win.

We can perhaps understand this part of not repaying evil with evil. But how can you love your enemies? We have a little problem with this word – 'to love'. During last 150 years we've been taught that 'to love', it means some kind of emotions, sympathy to other person. It is partly true, but this is not the foundational meaning for the word 'to love' according the Bible.

To love, is first and foremost, to act for the good of others. To serve them, to help them, to do the best for them. To love is not that much about our feelings, how it is about our actions. What Jesus requires - are actions. Love your enemies! Take care of them, do the best for them, live sacrificially for them.

And you know what? There is a surprise at the end. Emotions follow actions. Indeed. When you love someone in a sense of taking selfless care of this person, emotions of sympathy will follow. It works like this.

Wherever you invest your time, your energy, your resources, your heart, you get attached to it. It becomes more and more important part of your life. When you put your heart into serving one who acts like your enemy, after a while you will also feel affection towards this person. Our emotions follow our actions.

Pray for those who persecute you! You see, they are really your fallen brothers and sisters. They have been captured by our common enemy and now they are compelled to act against us. What we have to do, is to pray for their liberation from this bondage to sin and devil.

As soon as it happens, they are our beloved fellows brothers and sisters. Perhaps we'll spend eternity together with them. This is how our Father sees all of us. This is how Jesus sees us. This is how our God wants us to see this world.

To see how it really is. Very good as God's creation, totally corrupted by sin, and in desperate need of restoration. By our love and prayers we are called to be God's co-workers, restoring His fallen creation.

Now we come to our last point. How can we do it? It is so much against what we feel and desire. Don't resist evil, love your enemies! Even when the logic of these commands has been explained to us, it still doesn't make things much easier. We can't command our reaction, feelings, desires to be different.

We can't, that's true. But there is One, who can change us. By the power of the Holy Spirit. We all have been and partly still are enemies of God. Enemies of Jesus. Every time when we act against His will, every time we don't live according His commands, we essentially act against Him. Our actions then destroy the goodness of His creation.

When we are angry, when we don't see others as Jesus sees them, when we are unforgiving, jealous, insensitive, coveting, hesitant to love others, we act like enemies of Jesus. And we do it so often...

How does He respond? By repaying with evil? Or 'eye for an eye'? None of these. He takes our sins, our evil action upon Himself and stops the evil. He overcomes our evil with His goodness. He loves us, He prays the Father for us.

We wouldn't stand a chance if God the Father decided to be just with us, instead of being gracious and forgiving. But He sees us with all the wonderful potential we have, and he patiently works with us trying to shape us to be the best us possible.

His love towards you doesn't know limits. Our Father in heaven is perfect. Whatever often we fail Him, He keeps encouraging us saying: "You are my beloved child."

And Jesus, He keeps coming to us in His Supper. He gave His life for us, and now He keeps feeding us His holy and life giving body and blood. That's how He repays us, by loving us unconditionally.

When you experience this kind of sacrificial love, it indeed purifies the soul. It helps us to be different, it helps us to overcome our self-centredness, to love our enemies, and to pray for them. Let's go and do as our Lord has taught us.

Amen.