



Time to Reflect

- Can you recall instances in your life when you had to forgive someone? Did you find the process difficult? How did you feel once you had forgiven?
- How significant is prayer and Bible Study for us in our daily lives? As we approach Advent, could we spend more time reading the Bible and praying?

Last week we thought about marriage and speech as we continued our reflections on Christian living. We were challenged to be 'Promise Keepers' as we seek to grow in our faith. This week we focus on Christian love. This is an incredibly powerful passage, a life changing passage. It gets us thinking about radical generosity, unending kindness, and a depth of faith that is simply inspiring. This is the most admired and yet most challenging part of the Sermon on the Mount.

"Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling."

(John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p103.)

Passage Specifics

- Our passage begins (v38) by referring to the Law, as outlined in the Old Testament. The intention of this particular law was to control and limit revenge.
- In March 1994, the following devotional was published: **"When we are wronged in some way, our natural inclination is to fight back, to get even. Needless to say, this reaction, though thoroughly human, is almost always in error. Forgiveness...is better than revenge, for forgiveness is the sign of a gentle nature..."**
- History is littered with examples of people pursuing revenge, often at great expense and terrible results. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns this human reaction on its head. What he speaks of in this passage is not the need to win at all costs but the need to demonstrate grace and forgiveness.
- This can be a difficult thing to do and we all realise that hurts can run deep and be difficult to let go. But Jesus calls us to a higher standard of living, to offer unconditional forgiveness and remember that love always wins.
- Perhaps you can recall what happened on 13th May 1981. Pope John Paul II was crossing St. Peter's Square in the Vatican City when an attempt was made on his life. Mehmet Ali Ağca fired four bullets at the Pope. Two struck him in his lower intestine, one in his right arm and one hit his left hand.
- Remarkably, the Pope survived, and he called people throughout the world to pray for his would-be assassin, whom he had sincerely forgiven.
- This forgiveness was actively demonstrated in 1983 when John Paul II visited Ağca in prison. They had a private conversation and emerged as friends. As the years passed, the Pope continued to stay in touch with Ağca's family and in 2000 he requested that Ağca be pardoned. This request was ultimately

granted. In December 2014, Ağca returned to Rome and laid two dozen white roses at the Pope's tomb.

- Moving beyond hurt, embracing grace, and demonstrating forgiveness have profound and lasting results. This process turns the world on its head and highlights what true Christianity is all about. This is a shining of deep and incredible holiness.
- There, simply, can be no conditions and no limits applied on how we engage with other people. It is about going the extra mile (v39-42). In these verses we see four practical demonstrations of what it is to show radical love, to act with distinctive Christianity.
- This really is a challenging teaching, and we can only ever succeed in this by drawing close to God and seeking His help. We need to experience His mercy, peace, and grace if we are to extend those same blessings to others.
- Prayer is a grand means of drawing close to God. John Wesley once said, **"I have so much to do that I spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it."**
- But Wesley also passionately believed that the Bible is central to our spiritual development. We need to be people who read God's Word, who learn from it, and apply those lessons to everyday life. The Bible is a wonderful source of inspiration and guidance as we seek to live for God and grow deeper in our faith.
- This is life-changing teaching which we are reading about in this passage. Take a look at (v43-44). If we can genuinely love our enemies, whoever they may be, with real love and without ulterior motives, then we are classified as children of God.
- I just love how children mimic adults. They get to the stage, all too quickly, where they pick things up really fast. A philosopher once said **"Children copy their parents, friends, and teachers. They will develop the habits of the people around them. So, if you want your child to be honest, peaceful and happy you should be that way first."**
- If we are God's children, does our behaviour, do our engagements with others, reflect the attitude of our Heavenly Father? Are we being good ambassadors for God?
- These are challenging questions, and they emerge from our study of this challenging passage. (v44) calls us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. In doing this, we are demonstrating a depth of Christian love that is simply incredible. This is an indication, once more, that love always wins.
- Perhaps the entire passage, and the challenge of it, is summarised effectively in (v48). This is an incredible calling!
- It gets me thinking about Wesleyan Spirituality - which originated from John and Charles Wesley. The pursuit of perfection, personal holiness, is central to Wesleyan Spirituality.
- The Wesley's argued that this pursuit is an on-going process through which we seek to discern more about God, live a life that is reflective of God, and demonstrate a more perfect love towards our neighbours.
- This journey may be long and difficult, it will almost certainly involve change, and it will not be easy. But it is an interesting pathway to travel. As we embark on this spiritual quest we do so, only, by focusing on God and living the way that He calls us to live.
- This process sets a standard of discipline for our lives that helps us edge closer to becoming the person that God wants us to be.
- This standard of Christian living is a practical outworking of all that is contained in our passage and, once again, is a reminder that love always wins.

