

## What to Expect from God

Dan McCoig | Matthew 5:38-48 | June 6, 2010

1.

We are nearing the end of our year-long exploration of the theme “Getting to Know the Jesus You Thought You Already Knew.”

Hopefully, we are better acquainted with Jesus having attended closely to the Bible’s depiction of him.

But getting to know Jesus is only a portion of the equation of faith.

The other, and larger portion, of the faith equation is following Jesus.

Jesus, we have learned, is the revelation of God to humanity.

In Jesus, we see who God is – the person of God -- and what God’s intentions – the work of God -- toward us are.

The two – God’s person and work – as seen in Jesus can be described with one word, love.

Our Bible lesson for today comes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that God is in charge and that God’s rule works by very different standards from the world’s rule.

Through faith, Jesus’ disciples embody God’s rule.

God’s rule is observable in the way Jesus’ followers behave toward God and in the way Jesus’ followers behave toward neighbors.

The mark of this behavior is love.

2.

It’s important to pay attention to the structure of the Sermon on the Mount.

We are probably most familiar with the beginning of the sermon, 5:3-16, which is made up of blessings and sayings – the Beatitudes.

Following the blessings and sayings is the middle of the sermon, 5:17-48, which includes our lesson for the day.

This middle section is made up of Jesus’ interpretations of material from the Hebrew Bible, Jesus’ scripture.

Each interpretation includes two repeated refrains – “You have heard that it was said . . .” and “But I say to you . . .”

The sayings Jesus is using are from the Book of Exodus.

Verses 38-42 address the matter of revenge.

The Book of Exodus teaches the concept of restricted revenge.

In other words, revenge should always be limited.

A better translation of verse 39 would be “Do not use violence to resist an evil-doer.”

As a rule, we respond in one of two ways to evil.

One, we fight, which is the revenge mode.

Two, we flee into passivity or indifference.

Jesus essentially is opposing both responses by adding a third; namely, Christians are to oppose evil with creative, imaginative non-violent resistance.

Such resistance is designed to confound the powerful, to restore dignity and initiative to the oppressed, and to publicly shame or disarm aggressors.

Ghandi employed Jesus’ ideas in the Indian movement for independence from Great Britain in the 1940s.

King employed Jesus’ ideas in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s.

Verses 43-48 address the matter of believers’ behavior toward neighbors and enemies alike.

Jesus rules out dividing the world into neighbors and enemies with one code of conduct for neighbors and another code of conduct for enemies.

Rather, Jesus commands followers to use our code of conduct for neighbors – love – equally for enemies.

The Bible is crystal clear about who God is.

God is love.

The Bible is crystal clear about the nature of God’s love.

God’s love is indiscriminate – it is extended to both the good and the bad; it is life giving and it is merciful.

This is exactly the kind of love Jesus is commanding of his disciples.

This is exactly the kind of love Jesus is commanding of us.

What can we expect of God?

Love.

An equally pressing question is what can God expect of us.

The answer is the same.

Love of God and love of neighbor.

Cheek-turning love.

Second-mile love.

3.

Lisa and I are dog-lovers.

As a dog lover I am fond of the way dogs are portrayed in literature.

When I was in junior high school, I had an English teacher who introduced me to the novels of Jack London.

I fell in love with London's description of the men and their dogs, who lived and worked in the Arctic wilderness of the Yukon Territories during the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s.

Recently, I was in one of our local bookstores perusing the assigned summer reading lists of the schools in our area.

I was delighted to see London's novel *The Call of the Wild* on the lists.

The novel is unique in that its protagonist is a dog, Buck.

Buck begins as a family pet in California.

He is stolen, sold to traders in the Yukon and trained as a sled dog – a very valuable commodity in the Great White North.

Buck is sold numerous times in the novel.

Each new owner is less savory than the previous.

Eventually, John Thornton rescues Buck who has suffered abuse, cruelty, exhaustion, and starvation.

Thornton lovingly nurses Buck back to health.

Toward the end of the novel Thornton enters a wager with more tough talk than thought regarding Buck.

Thornton bets everything he has on whether Buck can start and then walk for one hundred yards pulling a sled loaded with 1,000 pounds.

Thornton's bravado in the barroom diminishes as he faces the massively loaded sled.

As he fastens Buck into the sled's traces, Thornton realizes that he is asking Buck to perform an incredible task, perhaps even an impossible task – a task beyond all of Buck's normal strength and abilities.

Thornton kneels beside Buck.

Thornton attempts to ask Buck to delve inward and find the ultimate motivation to perform the feat which Buck unknowingly faces.

Kneeling, he takes Buck's head into his hands.

The man and his dog are now cheek to cheek.

Ordinarily, Thornton would playfully shake Buck from side to side or murmur some soft curses into Buck's ear, expecting Buck to perform out of fear or duty.

Thornton doesn't do either of these things.

Instead, he whispers to Buck, "As you love me, Buck. As you love me . . ."

Buck whines with suppressed eagerness.

As Thornton gets to his feet, Buck seizes Thornton's mittened-hand between his jaws and presses his teeth ever so slightly into the mitten before slowly and half-reluctantly releasing.

This was Buck's answer.

He could and would do what Thornton was asking, not out of fear, not out of duty.

He could and would do the incredible, the impossible.

Not out of fear, not out of duty.

And he could and would do it for the only motivation capable of the incredible, capable of the impossible, love.

He would do it for Thornton's love of him.

He would do it for his love of Thornton.

5.

I want to tell you something that is true beyond all measure.

Jesus loves you.

Make sure you get it.

Say silently to yourself, "Jesus loves me."

Now, say it aloud, "Jesus love me."

Now, look at your neighbor and say, "Jesus loves you."

Over the years I have noticed that many Christian have a life verse, a phrase, a mantra of sorts that helps them to better understand and live out their discipleship.

Here is one that a friend of mine uses.

"Nothing you can do will make God love you more, and nothing you can do will make God love you less."

Because, on the cross, Jesus, in an act of supreme love, died to save us from sin and death once and for all.

In the words of pastor and best-selling author Tim Keller, "On the cross Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving it all away. Jesus turns the values of the world upside down."

Here is the way New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright puts it:

*The real enemy, after all, was not Rome but the powers of evil that stood behind human arrogance and violence . . . [On the cross] the kingdom of God triumphed over the kingdoms of this world by refusing to join in their spiral of violence. [On the cross, Jesus] would love his enemies, turn the other cheek, go the second mile.*

No one else can command of us the things Jesus commands of us because no one else has loved us and loves us the way Jesus does.

Amen.