

“When Loving Is Hard”  
September 10, 2023  
Scripture: Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Some of you may have heard an interview on NPR earlier in August with an evangelical leader named Russel Moore. He’s just written a book titled *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical Americans*. He said in the interview that he believes Christianity is in crisis in our country, but not for the same reasons I often hear from other evangelical leaders. Moore left the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years partly because of the treatment he received when he criticized Donald Trump and because of the SBC’s poor handling of sexual abuse allegations in many of its churches.

But what really led him to believe there’s a crisis was conversations he’s had with many pastors across the country, who’ve told him that they’re finding when they quote Jesus’ sermon the mount, about turning the other cheek or loving your enemy, they’re being approached by parishioners wondering why the preachers are using “liberal talking points” in their sermons. And when it’s explained that those are literally quotes of Jesus from the gospels, rather than saying, “Oh! I’m sorry; I need to read my Bible more closely,” they’re being told those quotes are too weak and that kind of thinking doesn’t work anymore. He says in the interview, “When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus are seen as subversive to *us*, then we’re in a crisis.”

I completely agree with that view. I’m not part of the evangelical world. I don’t really consider myself to be an “evangelical” Christian, but all my life in the Presbyterian Church I’ve been aware of the influence of evangelicalism. And in my experience, usually a quote from Jesus outweighs any other biblical reference. But I don’t think the idea that Jesus’ teachings are too weak is especially new. Was the Emperor Constantine motivated by Jesus’ words as he expanded the Roman Empire in the name of Christ? And even though Russel Moore apparently has had a lot of conversations with frustrated ministers, I doubt those views about Jesus’ words are all that widespread. It could be that congregations haven’t heard many sermons focused on those words from Jesus. They may hear Jesus say, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” rather than “love your enemies” ...or “turn the other cheek” ...or “do not judge, lest you be judged.”

We preachers do have some influence over what becomes the accepted worldview in a congregation just by what we choose to emphasize from scripture. If I spend most of my time preaching about God’s wrath and the threat of punishment, of which there’s plenty in the Bible, why would you think about God any other way? By the same token, if preachers are telling their congregations that Christianity is on the ropes and losing against the forces of secularism and in danger of being abolished, why would anyone listening think Jesus’ teachings are a good idea?

That’s why I tend to focus on what the Bible reveals about God’s compassion and our need to love. Those things aren’t just abstract ideals. When we internalize that understanding of God, when we take to heart Jesus’ words about loving our neighbors, there are concrete effects in the real world. It’s no longer possible, or at least no longer easy to justify, regarding people of

other faiths with suspicion or rejecting certain people because of their sexual identity. When the love and compassion of Jesus are the standards we use to interact with others, we see them in a different way.

So, any instruction we find in the gospels needs to be understood in light of Jesus' love and compassion. Take this reading today. Jesus gives his disciples a pretty detailed process for dealing with conflict among themselves. This is only found in Matthew's gospel, so it might reflect some of the challenges that existed within the community of the gospel writer. Conflicts among members of the church are not surprising. If you've been in the church for more than five minutes anywhere in the world, you've probably encountered conflict. Jesus lays out a really very healthy process, I think, for dealing with it.

First, you try to settle things one on one. Direct communication is always best. But if the person won't listen, then you bring along a couple of others to hear what's said. I assume they're supposed to be neutral as far as the outcome; they're just there to listen. If that still doesn't work, then you're to go to the whole community: take it public. You may notice there's no mention of launching a letter-writing campaign or enlisting others to your side so camps can form. There's plenty of room in this process for turning the other cheek, for compassion, for love. Even when the whole church gets involved there's no mention of anyone being condemned or tossed aside. But if everything fails, then and only then, can you "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

That's an odd turn of phrase. Why "Gentile and tax collector"? Why not say you can ignore that person or cast them out of the community? What do we know about Jesus' treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors? Well, over and over in the gospels Jesus is accused of eating with tax collectors. He hangs out with them. Whenever he encounters a Gentile, he heals them or some member of their family. Jesus treats Gentiles and tax collectors with compassion and love. I think a lot of us, myself included, would like to have permission to be rid of those people in our lives who have wronged us. But Jesus doesn't let us off that easy.

Those people who criticize their preachers for quoting Jesus are probably feeling threatened in some way. They're fearful that their influence in the world will be diminished or their values will be undermined. That's not a new place for Christians to be; every writer in the New Testament probably felt that way. Paul certainly did. He talks about all the persecutions he endures, all the rejection. But his answer isn't to be defensive and hateful. He says, "Owe no one anything except to love one another." He says, "lay aside works of darkness and put on the armor of light." He says, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." When loving is hard the answer isn't to give up on loving; the answer is to put on Christ more fully and love even harder.

And I know there are circumstances when that solution is beyond our abilities. When Jesus talks about approaching someone who has sinned against you, I'm not sure he means physical or emotional abuse. There are some situations that require more than just loving. There are times when we need to heal first or when there needs to be justice and reparation. But even in those circumstances, if we give up our capacity to love, if we give in to anger and hatred, we are diminished in a crucial way and our souls suffer even more. Love can take many forms if we're

willing to find them. Jesus, by offering this teaching, encourages his disciples to explore the varieties of love and not give up on it even when every effort to reconcile fails.

And he adds something at the end that sounds like a non sequitur but I think is meant to be a warning: “Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” When we give up on love, when we seek retribution or we reject the humanity of another, we ensnare our spirits, we bind ourselves to hate. As those parishioners left their sanctuaries and chastised their pastors for being too weak by quoting Jesus, they bound themselves to something dark, maybe even binding the movement of God’s Spirit within them. Letting love loose, lets loose the movement of that Spirit in the world. We are empowered to have that effect in the world. Jesus invites us to be lavish in our love even when loving is hard. And he promises to be among us when we do.

So, owe no one anything but love. Let it rule in your hearts as an armor of light in the world’s darkness, for it’s in walking the path of compassion and love that we put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen