

Dealing with Bullies” — # 3 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

Message for Sunday, June 12, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48

Children’s Message:

A small boy at a summer camp received a large package of cookies in the mail from his mother. He ate a few, then placed the remainder under his bed. The next day, after lunch, he went to his tent to get a cookie. The box was gone.

That afternoon a camp counselor, who had been told of the theft, saw another boy sitting behind a tree eating the stolen cookies. He said to himself, “That young man must be taught not to steal.”

He returned to the group and sought out the boy whose cookies had been stolen. He said, “Billy, I know who stole your cookies. Will you help me teach him a lesson?” The puzzled boy replied, “Well, yes—but aren’t you going to punish him?”

The counsellor explained, “No, that would only make him resent and hate you. No, I want you to call your mother and ask her to send you another box of cookies.”

The boy did as the counselor asked and a few days later received another box of cookies in the mail.

The counselor said, “Now, the boy who stole your cookies is down by the lake. Go down there and share your cookies with him.”

The boy protested, “But he’s the thief.”

“I know. But try it—see what happens.”

Half an hour later the camp counselor saw the two come up the hill, arm and arm. The boy who had stolen the cookies was earnestly trying to get the other to accept his jackknife in payment for the stolen cookies, and the victim was just as earnestly refusing the gift from his new friend, saying that a few old cookies weren’t that important anyway.

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The Greatest Sermon in History is the teaching given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew

chapters 5-7, commonly called “The Sermon on the Mount.” This series of message aims to apply Jesus’ timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

How do you deal with bullies? There’s been a lot of talk about bullying in the last few years. Many of the young people in our land who have committed suicide have done so because they couldn’t stand the bullying any longer. Schools have policies on how to deal with bullying.

But it’s not just kids. Your boss might be a bully. Your next door neighbour. One thing that’s helpful to remember is that most bullies were themselves the victims of bullying when they were younger. They’re just following the pattern they learned. That doesn’t excuse their behaviour, mind you. But understanding the other person is often the first step in responding.

We’re going to see the wisdom that Jesus gives us on how to deal with difficult people. But first, let’s do a bit of a history lesson.

1) “An eye for an eye” is better than chaos

The Law of Moses in the Old Testament said that if someone hurt you on purpose, you could get revenge by doing the same thing back.

Leviticus 24:19-20, New Living Translation:

Anyone who injures another person must be dealt with according to the injury inflicted— fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Whatever anyone does to hurt another person must be paid back in kind.

This may sound rather primitive, but it was actually a big improvement over what happened earlier. Before this, I might accidentally trip and bump into you. You could turn around and shove me back. Then I might punch you in the face. Then you would beat me up. But then I would come back later and kill you. But then your family would kill my whole family.

The Law that God gave to Moses may sound harsh, but it was actually humane. It set up a standard for people to live by.

2) Refuse to retaliate

Jesus takes that commandment, and goes much further than it.

Matthew 5:38–39, New International Version:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Jesus says, in effect, “Refuse to retaliate.” You see, the moment you start retaliating, they are in control. They are pushing your buttons. One of the greatest principles of life that you need to learn is, you have control of your reaction. You cannot control the things that happen to you, you cannot control the things that people say about you. You cannot control the events, the persecutions, the hassles you’ll get. But you can control how you choose to react.

Viktor Frankl was a Jew taken by the Nazis to the dreaded concentration camps. What he experienced there moved him to write his amazing book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Here’s a quote:

You can take away my wife, you can take away my children, you can strip me of my clothes and my freedom, but there is one thing no person can ever take away from me - and that is my freedom to choose how I will react to what happens to me!

Jesus says “Refuse to retaliate.”

3) Respond to hate with love

Then Jesus gives the alternative to retaliation, the better way.

Matthew 5:43–47, New Living Translation:

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.”

“Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” How far we’ve moved from vengeance and getting even!

I’m not going to spend time analyzing this statement. It’s as plain as plain can be. What I want to do instead is tell you about someone who put this principle into practice.

In 1991, Michael Weisser, his wife Julie and their 3 children had just moved into a new home in Lincoln, Nebraska, where Michael was the Cantor and spiritual leader for B’Nai B’rith, one of two Jewish synagogues in that city. The Weissers were having breakfast when the telephone rang and a harsh, hate-filled voice said, “You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph Street, Jew boy.” Then the line went dead.

Two days later they received a package of threatening hate mail with a card that announced: “The KKK is watching you, scum.” It also contained brochures saying that the Nazi extermination of six million Jews during the World War II Holocaust never happened and that blacks and other minorities were inferior to whites.

The police and FBI advised the Weissers that they believed the person behind the phone call and hate mail was Larry Trapp. Trapp was the state leader of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and a dangerous white supremacist. Despite having diabetes that confined him to a wheelchair, police suspected him of building bombs and being the person behind many racist and terrorist acts throughout the state.

Larry hated Jews. He thought Jews were evil and were trying to control the nation’s economy and government. He also hated Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, Native Americans, women who spoke in public, and anyone else he thought should be “brought down a notch or two.” He sent threatening letters and phone calls to many such people. Others had their tires slashed or car windows shattered by his followers.

The Weissers continued to hear about fire-bombings and other hate crimes in their city and nearby cities, and they wondered if Larry Trapp was behind them. Michael found Larry’s phone number and decided to phone and leave his own message. “Larry,” he said, “you better think about all this hatred you’re spreading, because one day you’re going to have to answer to God for all this hatred, and it’s not going

to be easy.” Michael started calling regularly, leaving messages like, “Why do you hate me? You don’t even know me, so how can you hate me?”

One night at dinner, Michael suddenly wondered what he would do if Larry actually picked up the phone. Julie’s advice was simple. Offer to do something nice for him. That would surprise him!

Michael soon got his chance. He phoned one day and said, “Larry, when you give up hating, a world of love is waiting for you.” Larry picked up the phone. “Stop harassing me!” he said. “I’m not trying to harass you, Larry,” Michael answered. “I only want to talk.”

“What do you want? Make it quick,” Larry said.

“Well,” Michael said, remembering Julie’s advice, “I was thinking you might need a hand with something. I know you’re in a wheelchair and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something.”

Larry was stunned. He couldn’t think of anything to say. Finally, he spoke, but his voice seemed to lose its edge of hatred. “That’s okay,” Larry said. “That nice of you, but I’ve got that covered. Thanks anyway. But don’t call this number anymore. It’s my business phone.”

Before Trapp could hang up, Michael Weisser said, “I’ll be in touch.”

That was the beginning of an extraordinary change in Larry Trapp. He began to rethink some of the things he believed. When he withdrew his support for a racist TV program, Michael called and offered to listen if Larry wanted to talk. Larry said he didn’t need any help. But Michael said, “Do let me know if I can help you because I would love to help you. I’d like to be your friend, and I’m here if you need me. I mean that.”

Soon afterward Michael received a call from Larry. He said he wanted to talk. Michael and Julie went to talk with him. Not long after, Larry gave up his

participation in the KKK, and his racist views. He began to try to make amends to those he had terrorized. He spoke out in public about racism. He said of the Weissers, “I was their enemy. But they showed me such love that I couldn’t help but love them back...”¹

Jesus says, “Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” Let’s do it!

Next Steps:

- Think of someone with whom you have a difficult relationship.
- Pray for wisdom and courage.
- Pray for that person. [Not “Lord, make her change,” but “Lord, shower her with blessings.”]
- Reach out to that person with love.

¹ *Not by the Sword: How the Love of a Cantor and His Family Transformed a Klansman*, by Kathryn Watterson; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.