

Part Five
Love Your Enemies
Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ “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 neighbor 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.

STUDY

1) READ

- a) What are the two commonly accepted teachings or principles that Jesus tells his followers to reject? How are they to respond instead?
- b) How does Jesus characterize the common cultural norm for loving others? How does he raise the standard for His followers? What is Jesus’ stated rationale for loving our enemies?

2) MEANING

- a) In verses 32-42, is Jesus asking His followers to ignore evil and injustice, or give it a pass? Wouldn’t that be inconsistent with God’s character? Why, then, does he ask?
- b) Thinking through all of the Gospel narratives (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), how did Jesus role model the principle of loving His enemies?

3) APPLY

- a) Why are Jesus commands in this passage so hard to internalize and put into practice? How can we possibly love our enemies?
- b) How have you struggled with the urge to retaliate or to hate your enemies? What truths can we cling to in helping us with these struggles?
- c) Have you seen examples of these principles in action, either in the lives of others, or your own life? (Historical examples are welcome, too) What was the impact?
- d) Are there situations in your life right now where you are challenged by Jesus’ words here?

NOTES ON THE PASSAGE

v. 38 - While this teaching comes straight out of the Old Testament Law (Leviticus 21), the Pharisees had twisted it by taking it out of context. The passage deals with judicial remedies for violence resulting in physical injuries; they were sentencing rules for the judges of Israel. They were not relevant for personal payback or revenge, which was prohibited earlier in Leviticus: *“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”* (Leviticus 19:18).

v. 39 - In the culture of the day, a slap on the cheek was a gesture of insult.

v. 41 - It was a common practice for Roman soldiers to demand that a person carry their military baggage a certain distance. The person became a conscript, not a volunteer.

v. 43 - The Pharisee’s teaching, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy” was a blatant three-fold distortion of the original commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. First, it omits “as yourself” which markedly lowers the standard of love. Second, it narrows the scope of “neighbor” by excluding enemies. Finally, it adds a command to hate them instead.

COMMENTS

There are two themes in this passage: a negative prohibition against taking personal revenge and a positive command to love our enemies. Both are radical admonitions that challenge us to the core. They are a particularly sharp rebuke to our current culture in which people quickly and vehemently denigrate those who disagree with them on political and social issues – particularly via social media.

The prohibition on personal revenge does not contradict the importance of justice. Rather, the Bible consistently states that governing authorities are the proper administrators of justice, not individuals (Romans 13:4). Beyond that, recognizing the imperfections of human government, God is the ultimate judge, who in the end will right every wrong. This frees us from the need to exact personal revenge and opens the door to loving our enemies (Romans 12:19-20).

Jesus grounds His command to love our enemies in the character of God, who “... *makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*” (v. 45). In other words, God expresses his love to all mankind through the “common grace” of His creation and care for it. Therefore, His children should bear a familial resemblance by loving all others. But even more, as explained in Romans 5:6-11 “*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (v. 8). Again, “...*while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son....*” (v. 10). Followers of Jesus enjoy this additional “special grace” and are called to model it in their relationships with others, even their enemies.

In verses 46-47 of our passage in Matthew, Jesus calls His disciples to a standard far above common human behavior (i.e., even the tax collectors and Gentiles know how to return love for love.) Our ultimate role model is Christ Himself, who sacrificed Himself for us, based solely on God’s love, and absolutely no merit of our own. Even on the cross, Jesus asked the Father to forgive his executioners.

Forgoing retribution and loving our enemies seems humanly impossible. Yet Jesus concludes His comments with “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (v. 48). How can this be reconciled? Two things: First, in a judicial sense, we are already perfect before God because Christ has taken all our sins on Himself and in turn has given us His righteousness; Second, in our everyday experience, although we are far from perfect, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to follow God’s will and obey His commands. Through the Spirit, God is at work to make us more like Him, a process the Bible calls sanctification. So, over time we should see ourselves becoming more and more like Christ. That is, we are being perfected. This process will be fully consummated when Christ returns; then we will be totally perfected and fully united with Him.