

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Some of the greatest challenges in all Jesus' teaching are contained in Matthew 5:38-48. These verses confront us in a host of ways, but perhaps most directly in terms of how serious we are about actually believing and doing what Jesus says.

"You have heard that it was said, *'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*
But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But
if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and
if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and
if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.
Give to everyone who begs from you, and
do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, *'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*
But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;**
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
Do not even tax profiteers do the same?
And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?
Do not even Gentiles do the same?
Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

These are some of the best-known words of Jesus and to our ears some of the most challenging. I want to say right away that these are **not laws, but illustrations** of the way someone responds whose heart has been changed by a relationship with Jesus. If they were laws people could obey them in the wrong spirit, saying for example, *"I'll turn the other cheek, but after that I'll take you out."*

Jesus begins by referring to Exodus (21:23-25) and Leviticus (24:17-21) where we read about the law of retaliation - an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This was in its own time not a harsh decree but a step toward limiting uncontrolled wrath and retaliation - you couldn't kill someone because they had knocked out your tooth. It was a principle of equalization, but obviously a better approach is needed because as has been noted,

“An eye for an eye eventually will leave the whole world blind.”

In verses 38-42, Jesus is describing situations in which human beings frequently resort to getting even, paying someone back, holding grudges, or demanding fairness.

“You hit me, I’m going to hit you back. You insult me, I’m going to rip you.

You sue me, I’ll counter sue.

You tell me I have to do something, I’ll do it in a way that makes us both miserable.”

Living God’s way is often the reverse of the way people ordinarily behave.

In the human order, the presumption is you return harm for harm, hurt for hurt, that you only do what legally you have to do, and you only give to those who have some claim on you like your family or someone who has done a favor for you.

In the kingdom of heaven, the presumption is reversed. If I am a person of the kingdom then I am the kind of person who will return good for evil, I will do more than I strictly must in order to help others, and I will give to people merely because they have asked me for something they need that is in my power to give them. In every case, I accept personal responsibility for determining the most appropriate response as a child of God, not merely as a human being acting only on my own self-interest and a natural desire to retaliate. I must decide before God what to do in each moment. If turning the other cheek means that I will be dead and my children left fatherless or in danger, I have to consider the larger context in choosing my response. Remember these words of Jesus are not laws, but illustrations of how someone living in the kingdom of heaven responds.

The illustration *“if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile,”* referred to the practice of the Romans that permitted every legionnaire on the march to pile his pack and baggage on any passing Jew for the distance of one mile. (An example of this sort of behavior is when the Romans compelled Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus as noted in Mark 15:21.) A person had three options – refuse to carry the stuff and run for your life, which was not the wisest decision and often brought severe punishment. Or one could take it and at the end of the mile you could throw the baggage of your oppressor at his feet and flee. **Jesus suggests a third option, transforming the compulsory service after one mile into a voluntary service for another mile to disarm the astonished Roman with unanticipated and undeserved grace.** During this second mile, perhaps a conversation could begin; perhaps some interaction might take place. Maybe Jesus was thinking of the word of the prophet Amos 3:3,

“Can two wander together without becoming one with one another?”

Jesus is saying just because someone does or says something that is hurtful or asks you for something, you don’t automatically have to retaliate or to say no.

To renounce a violent response doesn’t mean we don’t resist, **but we can choose a different response, approach, or attitude than our opponent. We don’t have to act at their level.** When someone strikes us on one cheek, we don’t have to belt them, nor do we have to run away, we can look them in the eye or question what they’re doing. This is what Jesus did when he was being questioned by the high priest in John 18:22-23 which says, *“When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. ‘Is this the way you answer the high priest?’ he demanded. ‘If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, ‘testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?’”*

Jesus says, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”** Jesus did this even when he was dying on the cross, praying, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* In the less than life and death more mundane matters of every day living things like parking spaces, careless, hurtful gossip, or bad driving, I have not met enough Christians who do what Jesus says on this point. Jesus says God sends sun and rain, the keys to sustaining life, on the evil and unrighteous as well as on the good and righteous. Jesus says if you only love those who love you, if your friends are the only folks you greet warmly – you haven’t done anything that differentiates you as his disciple from unscrupulous people, non-believers, members of a gang or a group of thieves.

What marks a follower of Jesus, what distinguishes a true believer is precisely the ability to love and pray for people who are enemies, opponents, or adversaries; people with different views, beliefs, and opinions, even people who desire our hurt or destruction. A follower of Christ does not demean, insult, dismiss, or desire the destruction of one who is an enemy. Charlie Griffin and I attended a pastor’s gathering off-Cape on Thursday, while there I saw a bumper sticker that said, *“When Jesus said, ‘Love Your Enemies,’ I think that probably meant not to kill them.”* Jesus says to love your enemies, as God does, and to pray for them, even if they are persecuting you.

Jesus’ approach is not totally new, it is reflected in Exodus 23:4-5, **“When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.**

*When you see the donkey **of one who hates you** lying under its burden **and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.***

If you help someone who thinks you are his enemy, when you do something unanticipated like bringing back a straying animal, you may change how they think about you. If you see the animal of one who hates you, unable to get off the ground and there's part of you that is glad and you don't want to help, the Bible says, **you must help to set it free.** Today we might say, *"If you're driving down the road and see the person who hates you with a flat tire, and you would drive by honking your horn, waving, and laughing at him, you must pull over and help change the tire."*

Now Deuteronomy 22:4 says, *"You shall not see **your brother's** donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up."*

What should a person do when both his brother's and his enemy's animals need help at the same time? When they both have flat tires 100 yards from each other? The biblical answer is, **first help your opponent**, because then you rescue an animal and win a friend – then go and help your brother's ox. Change the opponent's tire first then go help your relative because of course your relative will understand. ☺

This is Jesus' strategy for lowering hostility and shrinking conflicts.
The best way to deal with an enemy is to make them your friend.

Gloating over the misfortune of others and hating enemies are not part of the being a follower of Jesus. The heart that Jesus gives is not one that delights in the misfortunes or failures of others. Proverbs 24:17, 25:21-22 teach us, *"Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble. If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you."*

Can we actually love those who hate us and do evil to us? What Jesus is talking about is not the feeling or emotion of liking an enemy nor that we allow someone to kill us. What is being advocated is practical love in action. Jesus aim is making the enemy cease to be an enemy. Paul wrote in Romans 12:17-18, *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* On Christmas Day, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. It was based on these verses from Matthew and was titled "Loving Your Enemy." Dr. King suggested three ways to love our enemies.

First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. Such forgiveness doesn't mean that we ignore the wrong committed against us. Rather, it means that we will no longer allow the wrong to be a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness *"is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning."*

Second, we must recognize that the wrong we've suffered doesn't entirely represent the other person's identity. We need to acknowledge that our opponent, like each one of us, possesses both bad and good qualities. We must choose to find the good and focus on it. **Third, we must not seek to defeat or humiliate our opponent, but to win his or her friendship and understanding.** Such an attitude flows not from ourselves, but from God as the Lord's unconditional love works through us. **The more we love, forgive, and pray for those who hurt, disappoint, or even hate us, the more clearly we reveal the nature of our Father in heaven.**

In his moving memoir, *Meant to Be*, Walter Anderson, who was editor of Parade Magazine for 20 years, relates a conversation with his friend Nobel Peace prizewinner, author, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. Anderson asked, "Why don't you hate those responsible?" Wiesel replied, "It would be silly to reduce such enormous horror, a tragedy unprecedented in the history of man, to hatred. That would be a betrayal of my parents and friends. Because, if I hated, I would betray their deaths. The enemy *wanted* us to hate him. I refuse. I will not grant the killer's wish. In the Bible, the first death is a murder. Cain is slaying his brother, Abel. Is the point of the murder that brothers ultimately must kill each other? Or does the story mean that whoever kills, kills his brother? We're told not to hate our brother in our hearts, hatred inevitably destroys the hater as well as the hated. The choice is ours. I choose to believe that he who kills, kills his brother and, finally himself. We are responsible for what we are."¹

We are responsible for what we are. Jesus says we are to repay as our heavenly Father repays, evil with good, curse with blessing, enmity by acts of kindness. The inexhaustible and gracious love of God that has changed our lives is what we are to imitate and share with others. We are to follow the strategy of God that aims at moving people to awareness, conversion, and friendship through undeserved kindness, grace, love, and generosity.

Blessing: *"Finally all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another,*

¹ Walter Anderson, *Meant to Be*, (Harper Collins, New York, 2003) pages 165-166.

a tender heart, and a humble mind.

*Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary,
repay with a blessing.*

It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.” 1 Peter 3:8-9