

## Matthew 5:38 – 48

<sup>38</sup> You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. <sup>40</sup> If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. <sup>41</sup> Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. <sup>42</sup> Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’

### Historical and Cultural Background:

- *Israel's Exile:* The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- *The Kingdom of God:* The Old Testament expressed unflagging hope that God would rescue Israel and restore them to His reign. This was called ‘the kingdom of heaven’ or ‘kingdom of God’. Almost all Jews interpreted this to mean a military Messiah (anointed king) who would unite Israel and defeat the Romans. Jesus, however, understood these passages to mean a deeper and more profound transformation in human nature, which he had to accomplish first in himself (Mt.3:13 – 4:11), and then in his followers. Jesus had just announced ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations.
- *Jesus' Transformation of the Human Heart:* Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 16 Jesus was describing how his process of transforming people will have a certain kind of influence in the world. In this section, called The Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:28), Jesus is laying out his transformation of the human heart.
- *Clothes:* Clothes were often used as collateral in Jewish culture and law (Ex.22:25 – 27; Dt.24:10 – 13). It was what you needed at night to stay warm (Ex.22:27, Dt.24:12 – 13).
- *Going a Mile:* Under Roman law, Roman soldiers were allowed to force Jews to carry their equipment for one mile. Needless to say, Jews despised Roman occupation.

## Questions

1. This is radical stuff! Francis of Assisi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. saw this section as fundamental to Jesus' message.
2. 'Do not resist an evil person'?
  - a. Before we interpret this to the extreme of being a doormat, or passively letting others commit evil (e.g. sexual harassment, etc.), let's see what Jesus is actually saying.
  - b. In this passage, Jesus contrasts not resisting an evil person with the Old Testament law of lex talionis, and eye for an eye. This appears in three places in the Torah both as a limit and a just penalty for an injury committed against someone else (Ex.21:22 – 23; Lev.24:19 – 20; Dt.19:21). So we are not to seek to do the same thing to someone else, i.e. to inflict the same injury on them which they did to us.
  - c. Also, Jesus had already taught about anger and reconciliation (Mt.5:21 – 26). So, we are supposed to approach someone if they have hurt us, to try to work out what reconciliation would mean.
  - d. Later, Jesus will teach about confronting a Christian person who sins (Mt.18:15 – 17). In the church, there are appropriate measures to take to get recourse, be heard, make a case, etc. Presumably if there are appropriate measures outside the church, i.e. with the appropriate legal authorities, those measures can be considered. What Jesus says below will have a bearing on how we do that.
  - e. Now, let's look at the examples Jesus gives, below.
3. Example 1: What is a slap on the right cheek? A slap on the left?
  - a. A right handed person (assuming that the majority of people are right handed) would slap a person on the left cheek. How would you slap a person on the right cheek? With the back of your hand.
  - b. So what kind of attack would this be? A social insult
  - c. The Jewish Rabbis had a law based on oral tradition found in what is called the Mishnah that said you could seek restitution in court. The offending party would be required to pay 200 zuz (a monetary unit) for a fronthanded slap and 400 for a backhanded one. So in that culture, you could take him to court and sue him for insult.
  - d. What would it mean to make your other (left) cheek vulnerable? What hand would your opponent have to use to slap your left cheek? Back of his left hand. That would be even more awkward.
  - e. What's Jesus' intention here? Calling attention to your opponent's willingness to insult you (presumably for following Jesus, see 5:10 – 12), even if it's awkward for them to do it.
  - f. Practical application: Your reputation is not your own
4. Example 2: Why would someone want to sue you and take your shirt?
  - a. Clothes were often used as collateral in Jewish culture and law (Ex.22:25 – 27 and Dt.24:10 – 13). It was what you needed at night to stay warm (Ex.22:27, Dt.24:12 – 13).
    - i. It's possible that Jesus was calling his disciples to forsake the collateral they had put down in order to borrow something. For example, if the fisherman disciples were borrowing someone else's nets, or owed money on nets, they had to lose their collateral (clothes) because they were leaving their job to follow Jesus.
    - ii. It is difficult to translate this into modern terms. Perhaps the most pertinent would be if you had just bought a house via mortgage, and offered the house itself as collateral. If you felt Jesus calling you to some other job or some other place, you might have to let the bank repossess your house because you put it as collateral.
  - b. Practical application: Your future financial standing and past obligations are not your own. If someone is trying to stop you from following Jesus in a situation like this (notice that that is the implied 'evil'), you take the appropriate losses.
5. Example 3: How would you have felt if a Roman soldier made you, as a Jew, carry his stuff for a mile?
  - a. Furious! Yet you would have to be free from anger and desire for vengeance in order to do this thing Jesus calls for. Jesus is saying to be free from these emotions.
  - b. How would the Roman soldier have reacted?
  - c. What would you talk about during the two mile journey? Jesus...?
  - d. Practical application: Your emotions are not your own. Your time is not your own.
  - e. Illus: Susan\* discovered that her college sorority treasurer was doing inappropriate things with some money. Since Susan felt like they held a public responsibility of trust, she had gone ahead and told the other officers in the sorority (the right thing to do, in my opinion). The treasurer was confronted and eventually asked to step down. Most of the other women were quite angry. The

other sorority officers maintained a cold formality towards the ex-treasurer, as they felt they had the right to basically cut off their friendship without saying that they were doing so. But Susan allowed Jesus to shape her response; she gave up her right to just ostracize her. Every couple of weeks, Susan met her for coffee. Their friendship continued. Sometimes loving a person who has done wrong means helping them accept the consequences of their wrongdoing and walking with them through it. (For sexual wrongdoing, the walking with them part might not be possible or advisable).

- f. Illus: ‘Never hate, because it ends up in tragic, neurotic responses. Psychologists and psychiatrists are telling us today that the more we hate, the more we develop guilt feelings and we begin to subconsciously repress or consciously suppress certain emotions, and they all stack up in our subconscious selves and make for tragic, neurotic responses...And modern psychology is calling on us now to love. But long before modern psychology came into being, the world’s greatest psychologist who walked around the hills of Galilee told us to love. He looked at men and said: ‘Love your enemies; don’t hate anybody’... Hate at any point is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital center of your life and your existence. It is like eroding acid that eats away the best and the objective center of your life. So Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.’ (Martin Luther King Jr., *Loving Your Enemies*, public domain sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 17 November 1957)
6. Example 4: Giving and lending
    - a. The Old Testament already had a strong ethic of helping anyone who asks (Dt.15:7 – 10)
    - b. Practical application: Your money is not your own.
    - c. Illus: When I graduated from college in 1994, I got a job at Intel, and soon afterwards I moved into a Mexican immigrant community to do ministry there. One morning, I was heading out to work, and Graciela Sanchez, a grandmother who was about 50 years old, asked me if I could give her a ride to work. Her usual ride, she told me, had been arrested. So I gave her a ride that day. We spoke in Spanish so I could practice. I gave her a ride the next day. I got to know her family better. I gave her rides to and from her work for over a year. Needless to say, that constrained my work hours. This was during the heyday of the late 90’s when the stock price was doubling every year. Employee surveys showed that over 2/3 of all Intel employees worked more than 50 hours a week. Usually, single people lead the rat race because it’s not until you’re married do other people look at you as if you have a life outside of work. But I wasn’t married then; instead, I was doing enjoying what Jesus was doing through me, enjoying my Christian team of friends, and disciplining some younger guys. One day my supervisors offered me a promotion. I thought and prayed about it, studied Scripture, and decided NO. It would require too much from me. Some said, “Really? You’d get more stock, more impact in the company, more visibility.” I said, “I’m sorry. I’m a Christian, and I feel like what Jesus is doing with me outside of work is too valuable – I don’t want to cut into that.” Within the next year, they offered me another promotion, and I turned that one down, too. By the time I was there for 4 years or so, I had mastered my job and was working about 30 hours a week. People knew that I loved Jesus and that he mattered to me, not least because every Monday, my co-workers asked me how my weekend was, and I told them about the youth in my apartment, about how we prayed for them, about how we valued spiritual mentoring, about how I saw families that had been transformed. And most importantly in this example, Grandma Graciela had asked me if I could be ‘el padrino’ – the godfather – to her son Uriel. In Mexican culture, that is a huge privilege, and I felt very honored. I was able to share that. All these opportunities happened because I allowed Jesus to shape my response to those who ‘detracted’ from me.
  7. ‘Love your enemy’? Really?
    - a. It might be useful in our day and age to think of our ‘opponent’ or ‘competitor’ or ‘detractor’ in whatever we’re involved with.
    - b. Jesus does not mean that we must ‘like your enemy.’ Agape love is about self-giving, unconditional love, not sentimental feelings. Your enemy remains your enemy. We may be upset and frustrated, but we are to care for the person in some way, in a real relationship, that goes above and beyond what normal reciprocation would dictate.
    - c. It’s also not the case, I think, that Jesus is calling us to accept other people’s evil, or passively watch it happen. Jesus used force on one occasion, in the Temple (Jn.2:13 – 25), stressed financial compensation for past wrongdoing (e.g. with tax collectors in Lk.3:7 – 14; 19:1 – 10), and

denounced evil when he saw it (e.g. the Temple leaders devour widow's houses, Lk.20:47). We can call attention to it and, in Jesus' name and for their sake, call upon them to change. But there is a sense that in order to do that, and in order for us to be in relationship with 'evildoers', we will need to absorb some of their malice (or general unfriendliness) personally. We are not to retaliate injury for injury, however.

- d. In case it helps you to know, historically, the early church did not have a strict pacifist position. They permitted Roman soldiers to serve as a police force (non-lethal force was seen as ok). But for the first three hundred years, they did not allow a Christian to serve in the Roman army making war on another people. This was probably because they saw political entities as tolerable and a limited authority (Rom.13:1 – 7) and also idolatrous and demonically influenced (see 'rulers and authorities' in 1 Corinthians 2:6 – 8; 15:24; Ephesians 1:21- 23; 3:10; 6:12; and 'elemental things of this world' in Galatians 4:3 – 9; Colossians 1:16; 2:8; 2:15; 2:20) See Dale W. Brown, 'Pacifism' in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, p. 645.
  - e. Illus: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 'The rules were simple: If a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted that the country needed healing even more than it needed that particular brand of justice. At one hearing, a policeman named van de Broek recounted an incident when he and other officers shot an 18-year old boy and burned the body, turning it on a fire like a piece of barbeque meat, to destroy the evidence. Eight years later van de Broek returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as policemen bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and ignited it. The courtroom grew hushed as the elderly woman who had lost first her son and then her husband was given a chance to respond. 'What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?' the judge asked. She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial. With his head down, the policeman nodded agreement. Then she, a follower of Jesus, added a further request: 'Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.' Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began singing Amazing Grace as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, but van de Broek did not hear the hymn. He had fainted, overwhelmed.' (from Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, 2003, Zondervan)
  - f. STATE: The ultimate aim of Jesus is to abolish the enemy, by making him a friend! By inviting the enemy to Jesus! This involves internal heart transformation for us.
    - i. God loves His enemies. Jesus himself concretely loved his enemies all the way through his death. But notice that his love for human beings who were his enemies was a purifying love? He was purifying his own human nature, by aligning it with the love of the Father, in order to give a new humanity back to us by his Spirit. So his love for his enemies is normative for us. Since not everyone will come to Jesus, our posture therefore needs to match the character of God (5:48), who does love his enemies.
    - ii. Incidentally, this is another reason why I believe hell is the purifying love of God. God loves His enemies. (Wouldn't it be weird if we had to love our enemies, but God did not?) What makes hell torment for people is that they refuse to allow Jesus to purify them. They receive his love as criticism, rebuke, rejection, and torture.
8. Love and Conflict
- a. Practical application: How does loving people in Jesus' name involve sacrifices of time, emotion, money, and reputation? Especially as college students?
    - i. Illus: leader share a personal story or personal hope about loving more people
    - ii. Illus: also share how this helps us know Jesus better
  - b. How is mere reciprocation a normal way of life? How does mere reciprocation lead to developing or maintaining enemies?
  - c. In any conflict, we can escalate the conflict or we can de-escalate it. Jesus clearly calls us to be peacemakers as he implied in Mt.5:9. But think about the heart change Jesus is really getting at

here: We are not our own, but Jesus' (1 Cor.6:18 – 20). Jesus is really getting at our rights to ourselves. There is no aspect of our lives that Jesus does not claim as his own.

- d. Practical application: What is a conflict situation you're facing, or can imagine facing? Roommate? Study group? Rival? How can you apply Jesus' love and strength and commitment to reconciliation to it?

### Inspiring Story: An Unfinished Work

*Silent Night*, by Stanley Weintraub, is the story of Christmas Eve 1914 on the World War I battlefield in Flanders. As the German, British, and French troops facing each other were settling in for the night, a young German soldier began to sing 'Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.' Others joined in. When they had finished, the British and French responded with other Christmas carols. Eventually, the men from both sides left their trenches and met in the middle. They shook hands, exchanged gifts, and shared pictures of their families. Informal soccer games began in what had been 'no-man's-land.' And a joint service was held to bury the dead of both sides. The generals, of course, were not pleased with these events. Men who have come to know each other's names and seen each other's families are much less likely to want to kill each other. War seems to require a nameless, faceless enemy. So, following that magical night the men on both sides spent a few days simply firing aimlessly into the sky. Then the war was back in earnest and continued for three more bloody years. Yet the story of that Christmas Eve lingered - a night when the angels really did sing of peace on earth.

Folksinger John McCutcheon wrote a song about that night in Belgium, titled 'Christmas in the Trenches,' from the viewpoint of a young British soldier. Several poignant verses are:

'The next they sang was 'Stille Nacht,' 'Tis 'Silent Night', says I.  
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky  
'There's someone coming towards us!' the front line sentry cried  
All sights were fixed on one lone figure coming from their side  
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shone on that plain so bright  
As he bravely strode unarmed into the night.

Soon one by one on either side walked into No Man's land  
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand  
We shared some secret brandy and we wished each other well  
And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave 'em hell.  
We traded chocolates, cigarettes, and photographs from home  
These sons and fathers far away from families of their own  
Young Sanders played his squeeze box and they had a violin  
This curious and unlikely band of men.

Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more  
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war  
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night  
'Whose family have I fixed within my sights?'  
'Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung  
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung  
For the walls they'd kept between us to exact the work of war  
Had been crumbled and were gone for evermore.'

God bless Matthew for his careful writing. Everything hinges on the fact that Matthew writes, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek . . ."

In Jesus' time, your left hand was used for personal hygiene and since, there wasn't always a lot of water to wash with, it wasn't used for anything else. Everyone was right-handed in those days. Using your left hand in public was a huge no-no.

In order for someone to strike you on the right cheek with their right hand, they would have to use with the back of their hand. This is the type of blow that a superior deals to an inferior -- in that culture, a master to a slave, a husband to a wife. It is a way of putting the subordinate back in their place. It was intended to humiliate a person. It might hurt to receive such a blow, but it does not have the same significance as a blow to your left cheek.

The person who back hands you expects you to submit to them, to accept your place in the pecking order. But if, instead of submitting, you turn your face so that they must strike your left cheek, you have just signaled something very different. You have signaled that you want to be treated as an equal. Now they have a choice -- to hit you with a closed fist or an open palm on your left cheek. That is the kind of blow dealt to a worthy opponent and it may just make them stop and think.

Jesus is speaking to people who whose lives are burdened with systematic oppression. He is empowering them to assert themselves, to change the system. This is not about a future pie-in-the-sky life, but right now. He gives three practical illustrations. The first one was turning the other cheek.

Next he says that if someone sues you for your coat; give him your cloak as well. Back then, life was easier, people wore just two pieces of clothing -- underclothes and outer clothes. The coat was a person's outer garment. It was often also their blanket at night. Sometimes it was the only thing a poor person had to put down as collateral on a loan.

Jesus' audience is made up of poor people. They know that they're going to be dragged into court for indebtedness and that the law is on the side of the wealthy. And Jesus says in that situation, when they take away your outer garment, give them your undergarment too. Jesus says "strip naked in the courtroom." Nakedness was taboo in Israel, but the shame was upon those who caused or viewed the nakedness. So the debtor would be shaming the one who took away his clothes. His actions said "You want my cloak? Here, take everything! Now you've got everything I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?" It is another way to make the creditors stop and consider their actions.

The final example is about the Roman soldier. The Roman soldier could legally force anyone to carry his pack for one mile, but just for one mile. The pack weighed 65-85 pounds, so this is not a light chore. Jesus is saying "when you come to that mile marker, you keep going." That turns the tables on the soldier. He is no longer in charge because you are willing carrying the pack, but you are violating military law. What if his centurion finds out? Now the situation is changed and there is the possibility of an unexpected outcome.

Jesus was asking something very difficult of his first listeners and of us. He was asking us to do the work of loving those who mistreat us. Contrary to popular belief, turning the other cheek is not about being a passive victim. It is about confronting the other person with the wrong they have done to you, by holding a mirror up to their offensive behavior. It is a way of treating enemies with respect -- because it assumes that if they knew what they were doing was wrong they would try to change it. Loving our enemies is hard work; it means campaigning and struggling with them so that they give up their hate and become reconciled.

It is hard work because it also means giving up our own hate. If we understand this passage to mean that it is OK to assert ourselves, not be doormats, that's good, but that's only half of what it means. It also means that we have to recognize the worth of the people who hurt us. We can confront them, but in ways that give them an opportunity to change and then we are to forgive and welcome them back into our lives.