

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies (Lk 6.27—28, 32—36)

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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 on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,^o what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. ¹

You will remember from last week’s scripture and sermon Jesus took important Old Testament laws and interpreted them for people in the light of the new life that Jesus came to give. Jesus made a fundamental change without altering God’s standards by dealing with the attitudes and intents of the heart and not simply with the external action. Remember that the Pharisees said that righteousness consisted of performing certain actions and not doing other actions, but Jesus said righteousness centered in the attitudes of the heart. ²

Today we again examine our need for anger management. In fact, when I first studied the words my reaction was “God, you’ve got to be kidding!” Jesus said we are not to demand an eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. This law is found in several Old Testament passages in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They are called the *lex talionis*, or the law of tit for tat, or the law of retaliation. This law was given to protect the innocent and to make sure retaliation did not occur beyond the offense. In the very earliest days vendettas and blood feuds were characteristic of tribal society. If a man of one tribe injured a man of another tribe, *all* the members of the tribe of the injured man were out to take vengeance on *all* the members of the tribe of the man who committed the injury; and the vengeance desired was nothing less than death. *This law deliberately limits vengeance.* It ruled that only the man who committed the injury must be punished, and his punishment must be no more than the equivalent of the injury he has inflicted and the damage he has done. This

^o Gk *your brothers*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.* Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Mt 5:38-48

² Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary.* Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 5:27

was never a law which gave a *private individual* the right to extract vengeance; it was always a law which laid down how a *judge* in the law court must assess punishment and penalty. In reality, the sentence was often for the person doing the injury paid money to the injured for lost of ability to work and the cost of medical care. That's the law!

But Jesus pointed out that while the rights of the innocent were protected by the Law, the righteous did not need to claim their rights of tit for tat. A righteous person would be characterized by humility and selflessness, and mercy. So Jesus did away with the very principle of that law, because retaliation, however controlled and restricted, has no place in the Christian life. For the Christian Jesus abolishes the old law and introduces the new spirit of non-resentment and of non-retaliation. I need some anger management!

Jesus gave three examples of the Christian spirit in operation. To understand Jesus' instruction we must examine his words and culture.

Jesus said if anyone hits s us on the right cheek we must turn to him the other cheek also. I need some anger management! But suppose a right-handed man is standing in front of another man, and suppose he wants to slap the other man on the right cheek, he will hit the other man's cheek with the back of his hand. According to Jewish Rabbinic law to hit a man with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as to hit him with the flat of the hand. So what Jesus is saying is: "Even if a man should direct at you the most deadly and calculated insult, you must on no account retaliate, and you must on no account resent it." I need some anger management!

Most of us live in environments where no one will slap us on the face, but in life there are people who will insult us, and Jesus was saying that the true Christian has learned to resent no insult and to seek retaliation for insults against us. We must remember Jesus himself was called a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber. He was called the friend of tax-gatherers and harlots, with the implication that he was like the company he kept. The early Christians were called cannibals, and were accused of gross and shameless immorality, because their service included the Love Feast. In the 19th Century when Wilberforce began on his crusade to free the slaves slanderous rumors that he was a cruel husband, a wife-

beater, that he was married to a Black woman were deliberately spread abroad over England and around the world. This can happen even in the church when someone is “insulted” because they are overlooked or omitted or out voted. But the true Christian has forgotten what it is to be insulted; they have learned from Jesus to accept any insult and never to resent it, and never to seek to retaliate. They have graduated from the anger management course with an A.

Jesus went on to say that if anyone tries to take away our tunic in a law suit, we must not only let him have that, but must offer him our cloak also. The tunic, *chitōn*, was the long, sack-line inner garment made of cotton or of linen. The poorest man would have a change of tunics. A man had only one cloak, the great, blanket-like outer garment which a man wore as a robe by day, and used as a blanket at night. It was Jewish law that a man’s tunic could be taken as a pledge, but not his cloak. This would be like giving so much money for a debt that I could not pay my rent or purchase food. So Jesus is saying: “The Christian doesn’t stand upon their rights; they never dispute about his or her legal rights; they do not consider themselves to have any legal rights at all.” There are people who are forever standing on their rights, who clutch their privileges to them and who will not be pried loose from them, who will militantly go to court rather than suffer what they regard as the slightest infringement of them. People like that have not even begun to see what Christianity is. Jesus wants us to be the Christians who do not think of rights, but duties; not of privileges, but responsibilities. I need some anger management!

Jesus then went on to speak of being compelled to go one mile and says that in such a case the Christian must willingly go two miles. For this I need anger management! This practice came from the Persians and their amazing postal system. Each road was divided into stages lasting one day. At each stage there was food for the courier and water and feed for the horses, and fresh horses for the road. But, if by any chance there was anything lacking or missing, any private person could be compelled into giving food, lodging, horses, assistance, and even into carrying the message himself for a stage. By the Roman times the word came to signify any kind of forced service to an occupying power. Anyone

could be compelled to supply food or to carry baggage. They didn't have to be asked nicely.

So Jesus was saying: "Suppose someone come to you and compels you to be a guide or a porter for a mile--don't do a mile with bitter and obvious resentment; go two miles with cheerfulness and with a good grace." Again Jesus is teaching us: "Don't be always thinking of your liberty to do as you like; be always thinking of your duty and your privilege to be of service to others. When a task is laid on you, even if the task is unreasonable and hateful, don't do it as a hard duty to be resented; do it as a service to be gladly rendered."

Jesus laid down three great rules, by which He lived—the Christian will never seek retaliation for any insult, however calculated; the Christian will never stand upon their legal rights or on any other rights they may believe themselves to possess; the Christian will never think of their rights to do as they like, but always of their duty to be of help. The question to us is: How do we measure up to that? I need some anger management!

But Jesus was not finished with his amazing instructions, He demand that we should give to all who ask and never turn away from the one who wishes to borrow. Jewish law taught that giving was a lovely thing. In Deuteronomy 15:7–11, Moses gave clear instructions on giving to those in need without regard of getting paid back in full. In fact Jewish law required that all Jewish debts be cancelled every 7 years. The Rabbis laid down five principles to govern giving. 1. Giving must not be refused. If a man refuses to give, the day may well come when he has to beg—perhaps from the very people to whom he refused to give. 2. Giving must befit the person to whom the gift is given. Give what they need, not just enough to survive. 3. Giving must be carried out privately and secretly. Giving is not to give us the right to brag or humiliate the person in need. 4. The manner of giving must befit the character and the temperament of the recipient. Again we are not to humiliate the recipient and be done in such a way that the manner of the giving was to help as much as the gift. 5. Giving was a privilege and an obligation because in reality all giving is nothing less than giving to God. I need some anger management! At times I can

be one of those people that say they will give only through official channels, and refuse to help personal cases. For many this is just an excuse for not giving at all, or removing the personal element from giving altogether. What about those beggars who don't really need the money? We must remember that it is better to help a score of fraudulent beggars than to risk turning away the one person in real need.

The Jesus tells us to love our enemies. I need some anger management! This contains a concentrated expression of the Christian ethic of personal relations. This passage describes essential Christianity in action. But we need to understand what Jesus was teaching. Remember that the scripture was written in Greek and there are four different words for *love*. First you have family love, the love you have for your children and parents. Second you have the love that a man has for a woman. From their passion they bare children. Third we have love and affection for our dearest friends, brotherly love. Fourth we have *agape* love indicating unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill. (*Agape* is the word which is used here.)

Remember, Jesus never asked us to love our enemies in the same way as we love our nearest and dearest. This is a different kind of love. In the case of our enemies, love is not only something of the heart; it is also something of the will. It is in fact a victory over that which comes instinctively to the natural human. It is a determination of the mind. We can only have Christian love (*agape*) when Jesus Christ enables us to conquer our natural tendency to anger and to bitterness, and to achieve this invincible goodwill to all persons.

Now Christian love does not mean we allow people to do absolutely as they like, and that we leave them unchecked. No one would say that a parent really loves their child if they let the child do as they like. Christian love will often mean that we must restrain them, that we must discipline them, that we must protect them against themselves. But it will also mean that we do not punish them to satisfy our desire for revenge, but in order to make them a better person.

Jesus laid this love down as a basis for personal relationships. People use this passage as a basis for pacifism and as a text on which to speak about international relationships. It includes that, but first and foremost it deals with our personal relationships with our family and our neighbors and the people we meet with every day in life. It is easy to go about declaring that there should be no such thing as war between nation and nation, but it is more difficult to live a life in which we personally never allow any such thing as bitterness to invade our relationships with those we meet with every day. “This means me.”

This commandment is possible only for a Christian. Only the grace of Jesus Christ can enable a person to have this unconquerable benevolence and this invincible goodwill in their personal relationships with other people. It is only when Christ lives in our hearts that bitterness will die and this love spring to life. It is often said that this world would be perfect if only people would live according to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount; but the plain fact is that no one can even begin to live according to these principles without the help of Jesus Christ. We need Christ and the Holy Spirit to enable us to obey.

Lastly—and it may be most important of all—we must note that this commandment does not only involve allowing people to do as they like to us; it also involves that we should do something for them. We are bidden to pray for them. No person can pray to God for another person and still hate them, something happens. We cannot go on hating another person in the presence of God. The surest way of killing bitterness is to pray for the person we are tempted to hate.

Jesus demands that a person have this Christian love, this unconquerable benevolence, this invincible goodwill because such a love makes a person like God. Jesus pointed to the action of God in the world. God makes the sun to rise on the good and the evil; God sends the rain on the just and the unjust. Rabbi Joshua ben Nehemiah used to say, “Have you ever noticed that the rain fell on the field of *A*, who was righteous, and not on the field of *B*, who was wicked? Or that the sun rose and shone on Israel, who was righteous, and not upon the Gentiles, who were wicked? God causes the sun to shine both on Israel and on the nations, for the Lord is good to all.” Jesus said we must have this love

that we may become “the children of our Father who is in heaven.” The reason we must have and show Christian love is that God has it; and, if we have it, we become nothing less than godlike people, and this gives us the key to one of the most difficult sentences in the New Testament, the sentence that says “You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” On the face of it that sounds like a commandment which cannot possibly have anything to do with us. There is none of us who would even faintly connect ourselves with perfection. Remember, we need some anger management!

But the Greek word for *perfect* means mature or right. An animal which was fit for a sacrifice to God, without blemish, is said to be perfect. A person who has reached full-grown maturity is said to be perfect. A student who has reached a mature knowledge of their subject is called perfect. Another way of looking at perfect is in functional terms. It means to reach a purpose, an aim, a goal. So a person fulfills the purpose for which they were created, they are said to be perfect. Humans were created to be like God. The characteristic of God is this universal benevolence, this unconquerable goodwill, this constant seeking of the highest good of every person. God’s great characteristics are loving and seeking the highest good for the saint and the sinner alike. It is when we show unconditional Christian love and forgiveness that we become like God, and are therefore perfect in the New Testament sense of the word. We enter upon Christian perfection, when we learn to forgive as God forgives, and to love as God loves.^{3 4 5}

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 162

⁴Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:31

⁵Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 606