



Retaliate with Love
Matthew 5:38-48

Let me invite your attention to Matthew 5 as we continue in our series through Matthew. Matthew 5, 6, and 7 contain what is often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. This morning we are going to finish chapter 5 which finishes a minor section of the Sermon on the Mount, so I want to give a quick review of this small section.

Earlier in the chapter, in verses 17-20, Jesus explained that he did not come to abolish the law, but rather he came to fulfill it. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were zealous about the law, but Jesus had some shocking words about the Pharisees and following the law.

Matthew 5:20

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Pharisees, whom everyone would have thought to be the most righteous of people, in their zealous keeping of the law, actually lowered the bar. But the way of Jesus is greater. Because true righteousness is not merely about outward behavior, it also includes our hearts.

The rest of chapter 5, where we've been the last number of weeks, offers examples given by Jesus as to what that righteousness looks like in the life of the follower of Jesus. There are 6 examples total, each beginning with Jesus saying, "You have heard it said...but I say unto..."

We've looked at the first 4 passages examples given by Jesus so far:

1. You've heard it said you should not murder, but I say unto you don't even be angry.
2. You've heard it said you should not commit adultery, but I say unto you don't even lust.
3. You've heard it said you must give a certificate of divorce, but I say unto you only certain circumstances make divorce allowable.
4. You've heard it said you should not swear falsely, but I say don't take oaths at all.

Each time, Jesus raises the bar of what true righteousness looks like. And so these have been difficult sayings of Jesus. This morning we are going to look at the last two

since they are so closely connected, and these might be the hardest teachings of Jesus of them all.

This morning's passage answers the question: **What does righteousness look like when responding to those who have legitimately wronged us? What does a follower of Jesus do in response to hatred, persecution, and harm?**

And this is incredibly important for all of us. Because what is assumed in this passage is that we will all be the victims of harm. We all will be wronged in some way. We all will face persecution—to some extent—for our faith in Jesus. And the religious leaders of the day counseled their followers in a certain way that desperately needed correction by Jesus, and the truth is, we probably need correction and guidance in the way we respond to those who harm and hate us as well.

I want to read the whole passage up front and then we will walk through it together...

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.

So again, some very tough words from Jesus as he gives instructions about retaliation and hate. Let's look first at Jesus' warning against retaliation...

I. Warning Against Retaliation

Matthew 5:38-42

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.

Verse 38 is a direct quote of a portion of law (Ex. 21 and Lev. 24). It's a familiar saying even today. But in the context of the law given to the people of Israel, this law was intended to serve as a guide for the courts in their judgments by preventing them from demanding unjust punishments on a lawbreaker.

The idea here is that "no matter how great the offender, he could not escape just punishment, and no matter how small, no more could be exacted of him than his offense merited." (Morris, 126)

We would say that is just and right, something we can get behind, but some of Jesus' contemporaries used this law to justify personal vengeance. In other words, the counsel would've been, if you choose to get revenge on someone who has harmed you, just make sure that it is equal and fair.

But Jesus says, actually, no, don't do that. And to be clear, Jesus is not saying don't use the courts as the means to pursue justice, that was certainly provided for in the law and is a good thing for any society when they are just. Jesus is saying don't pursue personal vengeance.

He says there in verse 39...

Matthew 5:39a

But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil...

That word "resist" specifically refers to acts of personal retaliation. It is to personally set oneself against...And instead, Jesus says, true righteousness responds differently.

He gives four examples of refraining from retaliation, surely not meant to limit the principle to just these specific circumstances, but examples that serve to illustrate this principle for Jesus' followers.

Jesus says refrain from retaliation...

1. ...in response to violent insults -

Matthew 5:39

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.

To be slapped on right cheek signified an insult. It is likely that you are backhanded. Like spitting in someone's face. Jesus says, in response, disciples should endure another insulting blow rather than retaliating in anger.

2. ...in response to legal challenges -

Matthew 5:40

And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

The cloak was the outer garment in those days and would have been more expensive than the tunic that was worn. And Jesus says, if someone sues you, offer more, perhaps as a means of reconciliation rather than taking vengeance.

3. ...in response to abuse of authority -

Matthew 5:41

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Remember that the Jewish people lived under Roman rule, so it was common for the people to be subjugated to service. And Jesus says, don't retaliate to that Roman soldier who forces you to serve. In fact, fulfill your obligation and then offer to do more.

4. ...in response to requests for financial assistance -

Matthew 5:42

Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Because of the context, the idea here likely refers to retaliating against someone by withholding from them though they are in need. Rather than saying to them, "Oh, how the tables have turned," Jesus says to give. Don't refuse them.

The big idea here in this paragraph is that the OT does not justify personal acts of vengeance, though the law is good and is used to punish crimes.

And the next paragraph the last example is closely connected so I want to go on and look at that. Jesus moves from warning against retaliation to warning against the heart's condition that might motivate revenge...he warns against hate.

II. Warning Against Hate

Matthew 5:43-44

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

So, verse 43 is a direct quote of the law, we find the call to “love your neighbor” in Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, of course, will later say that love for neighbor is part of the Great Commandment, along with love for God all of the law hangs on these two truths.

He says, you've heard it said to love your neighbor, but he also says you've heard it said to hate your enemy. Now, what's interesting about that is that is nowhere in the Old Testament. That was not a part of the law.

What happened is that it came to be assumed to be true and right by the religious leaders. If the call was to specifically love my neighbors, then that means we can, and even should, hate our enemies. So, the counsel of the Pharisees was to love those close to you, love those like you, love those who love you back, and go ahead and hate those who aren't like you and who hate you.

But Jesus comes along and completely upends this way of thinking. And he does that by causing them to reconsider who they might view as their “neighbor.” In Jesus' teachings he points out that our neighbor is not just the ones near us or like us or kind to us, but our neighbor is everyone! Regardless of their background, regardless of their attitude, regardless of how they treat us and view us. They are our neighbor, thus we are called to love them, even if they might be considered an “enemy.”

Now, I think this is where it gets personal for us. Let me ask, who might you view as an enemy?

That might be a specific person that you personally know. Someone who has harmed you in some way. They've hurt you by what they've said to you and about you. Maybe they've physically harmed you. Even if you've never thought of them this way, you would say if I have an enemy, that person fits the bill. Jesus says, love them.

That might be a specific person that you've never met, but his or her reputation is so repulsive to you that you harbor ill feelings about them and desire to see their downfall. Jesus says, love them.

That might be a group of people, perhaps a certain segment of the community, perhaps it's a voting bloc, perhaps it's a group of people in another part of the world, but in any case, your eyes roll or your skin crawls or your temper flares when they come up in conversation. Jesus says, love them.

And if that wasn't hard enough to hear, we can't miss that Jesus says love for our enemies is shown through action.

Again in the verses 39-42, Jesus calls us to graciously endure evil by doing good. To be generous with our time and our resources even to those who have no desire to be gracious to us.

In verse 44, Jesus says that we are to pray for those who persecute us. And notice it is not merely pray "about" those we might view as our enemies, but to pray "for" them.

It's to pray, Lord would you bring about good in their life? Would you help them see their sin and wickedness, and would you bring them to repentance? Would you bring about reconciliation with them?

Do you pray like that for the people you struggle the most with? If not, why? Why don't we pray for our enemies? I think we don't for two reasons:

1. We don't *believe* they will repent and change. That they are so vile and wicked that they are a lost cause with no hope, so why bother?
2. We don't *want* them to repent and change. Think Jonah, who was called to preach to the Ninevites, a people he despised. In Jonah 4:2, he said...

Jonah 4:2

...That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

We might not pray for them, because we don't want the Lord to be gracious to them.

But if you find yourself in that place with someone or some group of people, start praying for them. You see, it is really hard to harbor hate for someone when you actively pray for them.

So, what does righteousness in responding to those who legitimately hurt us look like? We retaliate...but not as the world or our flesh might retaliate. We retaliate with grace. We retaliate with love. We retaliate with prayer and generosity and patience...

Now, I think the reason we struggle with this so much, is because it feels like letting evil win. It feels like we are being called to live like punching bags to the world. That we are supposed to just let people get their shots in while we just take them in the name of being nice, because that's what Christians are supposed to be.

But it's so important to see that is not what the Bible teaches. Jesus is not calling you and me to be the punching bags of the world in the name of being nice. It's important to see that the way of the kingdom is different than the way of the world.

And when we refuse to retaliate and refuse to hate others, we are walking in the way of the kingdom. And this does two things: 1) it actually overcomes evil and 2) it reflects the Father.

Again, living this way is not to be indifferent to evil but to acknowledge evil, face evil, and to overcome evil *by doing good*.

Romans 12:14, 17-21

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...**17** Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. **18** If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." **20** To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There is a very real sense in that by responding to evil and harm with grace and love we are not just enduring, but we are overcoming. Christians are not called to be indifferent to evil, we are called to face it, but we face it in a different way than the world. We face evil with good. And Scripture says in so doing we might overcome it.

And I think we have an opportunity to learn from the global Church here. We have many brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who face very serious persecution for their faith every day. They face insults, marginalization, and physical violence with grace and love in the name of Jesus. They seek to follow Jesus by loving and praying for those who see them as enemies.

ILLUS. - In fact, I read a beautiful story this week about a small group of believers in a village in southern Ethiopia who face real persecution for their faith.¹

The part of Ethiopia where this church is located is majority Muslim and Ethiopian Orthodox. The Protestant Christians there are a very small minority. They face persecution from both of the other religious groups there. The pastor there, Pastor Yohannes, said, "There is huge oppression targeting evangelical Christians in the area. When a person converts from another religion to Jesus Christ, there are intimidation and threats of killing. They write on a piece of paper, 'If you don't denounce this God,

¹ For the full story, read "Radical love on display in Ethiopia," <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/stories/radical-love-Ethiopia-persecuted-Christians/>.

we will slaughter you in three or four days,' and they leave the paper outside the converts' doors.”

He says, “From their point of view, an evangelical Christian is as good as a dead and rotting person.”

He recounted how recently they went out as a group to evangelize and they were attacked by a group, beating the men of the group and causing them to flee and hide in the forest for days before returning home. The women were drug by their hair on the ground. During church, people will throw stones at the church building, breaking windows and hitting people inside.

So, how should they respond to this? How should they respond to their community who want them dead? Well, they decided to do good for the community.

Pastor Yohannes and his church started a school, something that was needed. And in so doing, it has changed how the small group of believers is perceived. He said, in the face of persecution, “we prayed without ceasing for their surrender to Christ because even when Jesus was suffering, he prayed for his persecutors saying, ‘Forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.’”

He went on, “The biggest solution for these problems and for these persecution is prayer. The other solution is doing good to those who harm us-doing good to the community that is persecuting us; that’s the only way we can change the community. Loving our enemies is biblical, and it’s truth. We don’t have a choice, other than loving our enemies, because we can’t live apart from the Word of God.”

He said that over time, the hatred began to diminish and they even began to like us for the good we were doing for them and the community. He said, “The families who used to throw stones at the church have no started sniff their children to this school. They feel a sense of belonging.”

They overcame evil with good. Rather than retaliation and hate, they love, pray, and do good.

So, loving our enemies is the means for overcoming evil, but another reason we are called to this way of life is because it reflects the Father...

III. Like Father, Like Son: The “Contra-Conditional” Love of Our Father in the Gospel (v. 45-48)

Matthew 5:45-48

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.

V. 45, 48 - not to earn our adoption, but as evidence of our being the sons and daughters of God

What is Jesus saying? He is saying children of the Father love their enemies and show gracious patience with them, because that is exactly what the Father does. God loves sinners. That is the amazing truth of the Bible. God loves sinners.

And I think some clarity on how God loves sinners actually helps us here in this passage when we are called to love sinners too.

One of the ways we describe God's love is that it is unconditional. And that is true to some extent. What we mean when we describe it like that is that God's love is not dependent on us getting our lives cleaned up first. God's love isn't something we have to merit or earn.

And so we know that and we enjoy that, but then we are called to love our enemies like God loves and something feels off. We might think, man, that means I have to love unconditionally, but that feels unjust, doesn't it? Like I am accepting them and their actions as if they are fine. Like I have to ignore their sin, or worse I have to accept their sin. And so we struggle to love, because we know that is not what they deserve!

But here is where seeing God's love differently might help. David Powlison wrote a helpful chapter about this, and he said that God's love is better than unconditional; it is "contra-conditional."² What he means by that is that in his love, God doesn't ignore our state, he doesn't ignore sin, he doesn't minimize actions and people who are rightly characterized as evil and unjust, it's just that he loves *contrary* to what we deserve.

And so it is with us as we face those who harm us, malign us, and persecute us. We love them, not because we ignore evil or sin, but we love *contrary* to their deserving it. We acknowledge evil. We acknowledge sin, but we love and do good in spite of it.

Why do we do that? Because that is how God has loved us. He has loved us contrary to what we deserve.

² David Powlison, "God's Love: Better than Unconditional," in *Seeing with New Eyes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 163-170.

Prior to our salvation we were all enemies of God. But out of love, Jesus lived and died in our place that we might be reconciled back to him by faith and repentance.

Rom. 5:10-11

10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. **11** More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is the good news of the gospel. That though we are rightly separated from God, God's love is better than unconditional, it is contra-conditional. He loves us in spite of our sin and has worked through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son to redeem us and make us new that we might live with him forever.

And so this good news is for us today. For those who have never recognized their condition before God and have never trusted in Jesus, know that you are separated. But God in his love has accomplished for you what you couldn't on your own and now he calls you to himself. By putting your repentant faith in Jesus you can move from being an enemy of God to a child of God.

For those who have recognized their need for Christ, are you reflecting your Father in the way you relate to those who might be deemed enemies? If not, Jesus says, what difference is there between you and an unbeliever? You are called to more. You are called to reflect the Father as you love, pray, and do good to those who are our enemies, and by doing that you work to overcome evil.

COMMUNION

This morning we will celebrate communion together, remembering the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus that has made us children rather than enemies of God.

So in a moment after I pray, those who are Christians are welcome to partake of the table together.

CONFESSION

But before we do that, I want to invite us to bow our heads and close our eyes as we spend a few moments in silent prayer and confession...

Confess known sin...thank the Lord for his love...perhaps pray for that person or people that you struggle with...

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Romans 5:6-8

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. **7** For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— **8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

VERSES

Matthew 5:20

Matthew 5:38-48

Matthew 5:38-42

Matthew 5:39a

Matthew 5:39

Matthew 5:40

Matthew 5:41

Matthew 5:42

Matthew 5:43-44

Jonah 4:2

Romans 12:14, 17-21

Matthew 5:45-48

Romans 5:10-11

Romans 5:6-8

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which do you think is Jesus' hardest teaching? Why?
2. Why is loving our "enemies" so difficult?
3. What should we pray for when we pray for our "enemies?"

4. Why might we prefer to overcome evil with evil, rather than good?
5. What was meant when God's love was described as "contra-conditional?"