

Deeper Discoveries

Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 9: Matthew 5:38–48



Literary Design

The fifth example, on retaliation, transitions from what righteous persons *must not* do in Jesus' previous four examples to what they *must* do. The sixth example, commanding disciples to love their enemies, summarizes and encapsulates the previous five, which should not be surprising—Matthew later records Jesus saying that “all of the Law and the Prophets” depends on the commandments to love God and neighbor (v. 22:40). Paul will repeat this teaching for the Galatian church struggling with bad interpretation of the law for Gentile believers: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love...For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:6, 14). We were all enemies of God before we were loved and called to Christ, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Now, if the command “love your enemies” wasn’t stunning enough for those listening to Jesus that day, his concluding command, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” was the icing on the cake for those who would enter the kingdom of heaven. Put yourself in their position to feel the impact of Jesus’ words.

Old Testament Connections and Themes

How do we reconcile Jesus’ command to “love our enemies” with David’s words in Psalm 139:21–22: “Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.” Is this a contradiction, or a rejection of the Old Testament? Short answer: no.

The apparent tension between David’s hatred in Psalm 139 and Jesus’s command to love our enemies dissolves when you recognize the distinct contexts and objects of each statement. David’s hatred targets those who oppose God himself—“those who hate you, O LORD” and “those who rise up against you.” (Ps 139:21–22) David’s animosity isn’t a personal grievance but covenantal loyalty as the anointed king of God’s people. He identifies God’s enemies as his own enemies, expressing zealous devotion to the divine cause. This represents righteous opposition to those actively working against God’s purposes, not personal enmity rooted in injury or insult.

Jesus is not speaking here about cosmic enemies. When Jesus says, “Love your enemies” in response to the teaching “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” he’s addressing personal relationships and interpersonal conflict. (Matt 5:38–48) He calls disciples to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27–36). The enemies Jesus has in view are those who wrong you—who strike, steal from, and persecute you—not the cosmic adversaries of God. (*Logos Study Assistant. Edited*).

Commentary (Don Carson and John Stott)

[Carson on “eye for an eye”]: No matter how seriously we wish to follow Jesus, we discover, sooner or later, that seriously following Jesus entails hard thinking about what he said and what he did not say. We may not reach perfect agreement on all points, but we must agree that taking one statement of Jesus in isolation, without considering its context and other things Jesus says, can lead us to misunderstand him.

As I understand these verses, I do not think that Jesus has policemen and soldiers in view. New Testament teaching on these occupations focuses more on integrity, contentment with wages, and the like. Instead, Jesus

is speaking here of *personal* abuse and *personal* self-sacrifice, using the misunderstanding of Old Testament law as his starting point. The four examples he gives bear this out.

The first concerns a sharp backhand slap to the cheek, a gross insult. The follower of Jesus is to be prepared to take another one rather than retaliate. This attitude is especially important, of course, when the violence and abuse have come about because of some stand for righteousness (5:10–12).

The second example concerns a lawsuit in which a man is likely to lose his “tunic,” a long garment which corresponds to a modern dress or suit of clothes. The follower of Jesus will throw in the outer coat as well, even though Jewish law recognized this latter garment as an inalienable possession (Exod. 22:26f.). Such a lawsuit over a suit of clothes is unlikely. But at stake here is a principle: even those things which we regard as our rights by law we must be prepared to abandon.

The third example probably refers to the Roman practice of commandeering civilians. “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (5:41). An ordinary Roman soldier could legally compel a civilian to help him, for example, to carry his luggage for a certain distance. Jesus’ followers are not to feel personally insulted, but to double the distance and accept the unfair imposition cheerfully.

Jesus’ last example demands giving and lending that is cheerful and willing. His point is not the wisdom or foolishness of lending money to everyone who comes along (for which see Prov 11:15; 17:18; 22:26). Rather, the message of the passage is this: Christ will not tolerate a mercenary, tight-fisted, penny-pinching attitude which is the financial counterpart to the legalistic understanding of “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” Don’t be asking yourself all the time, “What’s in it for me? What can I get out of it?”

A legalistic mentality focused on retaliation and “fairness” makes much of one’s own rights. But Jesus says in these verses that his followers have no such rights. They do not have the right to retaliate and wreak their vengeance (5:39); they do not have the right to their possessions (5:40), nor to their time and money (5:41). Even their legal rights may sometimes be abandoned (5:40). Personal self-sacrifice displaces personal retaliation, for this is the way the Savior himself went, the way of the cross. And the way of the cross, not notions of “right and wrong,” is the Christian’s standard of conduct. [1]

[Stott on “love your enemies”]: It must be admitted that a pure and holy ‘hatred’ of evil and of evil men, unmixed with any taint of personal malice, is impossible for anyone not God. [Perhaps this is why Jesus makes murder/anger the first of the six examples.] The teachers of the law had no justification for changing God’s command to love our neighbor into a permission also to hate those who hate us, our personal enemies. The words “and hate your enemy” were a ‘parasitical growth’ upon God’s law; they had no business there. God did not teach his people a double standard of morality, one for a neighbor and another for an enemy.

Having indicated that our love for our enemies will express itself in deeds, words, and prayers, Jesus goes on to declare that only then shall we prove conclusively whose sons we are, for only then shall we exhibit a love like the love of our heavenly Father. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (v. 45). Divine love is indiscriminate love, shown equally to good men and bad. The theologians (following Calvin) call this God’s “common grace.” This common grace of God is expressed, then, not in the gift of salvation but in the gifts of creation, and not least in the blessings of rain and sunshine, without which life on the planet could not continue. This, then, is to be the standard of Christian love. We are to love like God, not men.

[1] D. A. Carson, *Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: A Study of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2018), 55. Edited.

[2] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 117, 120. Edited.