

Jesus Teaches About Transforming Love

Bible Background • MATTHEW 5:38–48

Printed Text • MATTHEW 5:38–48 | Devotional Reading • ROMANS 12:9–21

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: IDENTIFY what it means to love one’s enemies; CONSIDER how loving our enemies can be a witness of Christ’s love to them; and PRAY that God would work through us to show His love to our enemies.

In Focus

John did not like his new project manager, Ida. He never agreed with her decisions, wouldn’t answer her emails, and often used harsh and belittling language during meetings. Ida noticed John’s behavior, but she was determined to make her project a success. When John did achieve a task, she would write him a personal email expressing her gratitude for his efforts, and tried her best to affirm John. One day, right before a strategy meeting, Ida noticed John on the phone. He was pacing back and forth and looking really worried.

When he got off the phone, he angrily walked toward the office.

“Are you OK?” Ida asked.

“Yeah,” he replied and sat at the table. All of a sudden he blurted out...

“It’s just, my kid keeps messing up in school. They keep telling us if he doesn’t get it together, they’re going to have to suspend him or even worse expel him!” Ida could see how torn John was feeling. “My wife and I, we just can’t afford one of those fancy prep schools, ya know. We’re at our wit’s end!” For the first time, she understood why John had been so disconnected all the weeks prior. She now felt a sense of empathy toward him.

“Hey John, let’s reschedule our prep meeting for tomorrow. Maybe today we’ll just go for coffee instead...”

How can seeing our “enemies” as humans help us to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ to them?

Keep in Mind

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” (Matthew 5:43-44, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Evil poneros (Gk.) — In the context of this lesson means mischief, harm, or misdeeds.

B. Perfect teleios (Gk.) — Complete, full, or mature.

Say It Correctly

Persecute. PUR-si-kyoot

KJV

Matthew 5:38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
39 But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.
40 And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.
41 And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.
42 Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.
43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.
44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.
46 For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?
47 And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?
48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

NIV

Matthew 5:38 “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’
39 But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.
40 If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too.
41 If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.
42 Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow.
43 “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy.
44 But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!
45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.
46 If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much.
47 If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.
48 But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

The People, Places, and Times

Enemy. An enemy in the context of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was a person with whom strife existed for the hearer. This could include a member of the oppressive class such as a Roman soldier, a direct enemy or rival who lived in the community with the hearer, or someone with whom a person had a dispute or lawsuit. The enemy in this context would not be a spiritual enemy such as a demon, but a person living in the same vicinity who could have adversarial interactions with a person.

Background

The book of Matthew is based on the recording of Matthew the tax collector. His account of the Gospel characterizes Jesus as a teacher to the disciples and many crowds that gathered around to listen. In Matthew 5, Jesus climbs to the top of a mountain and begins to teach the disciples lessons about present and future ethics of society. Ultimately, Jesus’ teaching offered a different perspective on how one can live in the Roman Empire’s society. Opposed to following the customary value system and way of living, Jesus instructs His listeners to live a different life by following Him. In Matthew 5:38–43, Jesus teaches on two major subjects: retaliation and love

for enemies. Jesus takes the time to clarify a law that was misinterpreted by the Pharisees. He uses relatable examples to teach the disciples the difference between the meaning behind God's law on retaliation and the Pharisees' misinterpretation of revenge. This lesson on retaliation feeds into a lesson on loving our enemies. Jesus instructs the disciples to love and pray for their enemies. He draws comparisons to show that He knows this is not easy, yet He still instructs them to love their enemies. Each lesson calls us to a higher standard.

Given this Scripture, how do we define love?

At-A-Glance

1. A Lesson on Retaliation (Matthew 5:38–42)
2. A Lesson on Loving Your Enemies (vv. 43–48)

In Depth

1. A Lesson on Retaliation (Matthew 5:38–42)

Jesus begins this lesson on retaliation by recalling what the disciples may have been taught based on society's official or unofficial ethical codes. Jesus teaches on this important subject because He is aware of the Pharisees' false teachings and misinterpretations. The laws in the Old Testament about retaliation did not permit people to retaliate and seek vengeance against anyone unless a relative was murdered (Leviticus 24:18–21). The purpose of the retaliation laws in the Old Testament were to privilege civil justice, not individual revenge. Jesus teaches the disciples a method of de-escalating conflict through several examples (vv. 39–42). Turning our cheek and giving more than asked, whether materially or through our efforts, are ways by which we can mitigate the desire to retaliate. "Resisting evil" is a key phrase to focus on, because one can easily misinterpret what Jesus is requiring of us. In this context, resist does not mean meet violence with violence. Instead, it means to stand against any wicked deeds that are intended to cause harm or mischief. We stand against evil through love. Jesus aims to alleviate any confusion on the idea of retaliation to prepare His disciples and followers for a higher calling. He calls the disciples and us to a higher standard of love.

Why do you think Christians struggle with retaliation when the Lord promises us "vengeance is mine" (Romans 12:19)?

2. A Lesson on Loving Your Enemies (vv.43–48)

Verse 43 also begins with Jesus recalling another lesson known throughout society regarding hating our enemies. While the first clause ("love thy neighbour") aligns with biblical teachings, the second clause ("hate thine enemy") is not how God intends for us to treat our enemies. The Scripture does not instruct us to hate our enemies anywhere in the biblical text. Beyond simply not hating them, Jesus now instructs His audience not only are they to love their enemies, but also pray for them. Verse 43 also begins with Jesus recalling another lesson known throughout society regarding hating our enemies. While the first clause ("love thy neighbour") aligns with biblical teachings, the second clause ("hate thine enemy") is not how God intends for us to treat our enemies. The Scripture does not instruct us to hate our enemies anywhere in the biblical text. Beyond simply not hating them, Jesus now instructs His audience not only are they to love their enemies, but also pray for them. Verse 43 also begins with Jesus recalling another lesson known throughout society regarding hating our enemies. While the first clause ("love thy neighbour") aligns with biblical teachings, the second clause ("hate thine enemy") is not how God intends for us to treat our enemies. The Scripture does not instruct us to hate our enemies anywhere in the biblical text. Beyond simply

not hating them, Jesus now instructs His audience not only are they to love their enemies, but also pray for them. Verse 43 also begins with Jesus recalling another lesson known throughout society regarding hating our enemies. While the first clause (“love thy neighbour”) aligns with biblical teachings, the second clause (“hate thine enemy”) is not how God intends for us to treat our enemies. The Scripture does not instruct us to hate our enemies anywhere in the biblical text. Beyond simply not hating them, Jesus now instructs His audience not only are they to love their enemies, but also pray for them. Performing these two actions is one way to show the world we are children of God. Loving an enemy appears hard or impossible to most people, because we compare “loving our enemy” to loving a loved one or friend. When we view love as solely an emotion, we miss its meaning as an action verb. Love is filled with a deep generosity we often overlook. Even God generously treats believers who seek righteousness as kindly as people who do evil by allowing the sun to shine on all of us equally (v. 45). If God can be generous with something as magnificent as sunshine and rainfall, then the least we can do as God’s children is treat our enemies with generosity as well. Love in action, especially toward our enemies, demonstrates our choice to rise above society’s norms. Jesus points out by asking numerous rhetorical questions that it is easy to love and treat well people who love us back. Again, Jesus calls us to a higher standard of “perfection” or mature and complete relationship with Him. In sum, we love because Jesus loves!

What does God’s equal generosity toward the righteous and evildoers make you think about loving your enemies?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why do you think Jesus teaches about retaliation before calling His followers to love their enemies?
2. Considering the rhetorical questions Jesus poses (vv. 46–47), how should His followers’ understanding of love differ from tax collectors’ and Gentiles’ understanding?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How does grace operate when it comes to dealing with those who have used or wronged us?
2. How can we apply this difficult teaching of Jesus to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

Liberating Lesson

On June 17, 2015, one of the most heartbreaking events in our most recent history took place. Dylann Roof walked into a Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and opened fire on innocent parishioners, sadly killing nine victims. Globally, many people mourned and perceived Roof as an enemy. We found it hard to love this man because of his violent action. Many believers showed Roof conditional love due to his disregard for Black life and disrespect for sacred ground. However, family members of the victims chose to accept Jesus’ call to live and love at a higher standard. They embodied and exemplified what Jesus meant when stating, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). In the courtroom, they showed Roof love by asking God to have mercy on his soul and expressing forgiveness.

While still holding Roof accountable for his deplorable actions, the family members chose to love their enemy. By choosing love and forgiveness, they freed their hearts to experience liberty from hurt and pain. Realistically, liberation and healing is a process, but it starts with loving our enemies.

Application for Activation

Honestly, loving your enemies is not easy. Accepting Jesus’ call requires practical steps. Listed below are a few steps toward loving your enemies:

Identify the people who fit into the category of “enemies.”

- Determine and write down how each person has offended you.
- Pray to God to clear any rooted bitterness, hurt, or pain from your heart.
- Forgive them for their wrongdoing. Ask God to open your heart to loving the other person.
- Pray for and love your “enemies” each day.

Jesus’ call to act toward our wrongdoers differently is doable! All we need is love.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 5:38–48

38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: 39 But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Jesus continues the antitheses He has been teaching throughout the latter part of Matthew 5. He deals with the problem of retaliation, restitution, and forgiveness. Although the old principle, “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19–20) seemed to advocate vengeance and retaliation, it was given not for that purpose. Indeed, it was given explicitly to limit or eliminate excessive retaliation and vengeance. It was given, as is revealed in the Old Testament, as a judicial guideline for fair punishment for committed offenses—the punishment should be commensurate to the offense committed—neither too heavy nor too light. Rather than retaliation, Jesus says to His disciples to “resist not evil.” The word translated “resist” is the Greek verb *anthistemi* (an-THEESE-tay-me), which means to withstand, to stand against, or oppose. It has the idea of violence. Contrary to society’s norm or standard of meeting violence with violence, Jesus opposes such a norm. “Evil” (Gk. *poneros*, poe-nay-ROCE) here does not mean evil as related to the devil, which the Bible says that we must also resist (James 4:7), but instead the idea of harm, malice, mischief, or wicked deeds. Rather than meeting such wicked deeds with other wicked deeds (i.e., meeting violence with violence) or retaliation, we are to meet the evil with generosity and love.

40 And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. 41 And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. 42 Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

Jesus now gives examples of the evils and how we ought to react to them. “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek,” He says, “turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law [in court], and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak [shirt] also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain [two].” The idea here refers to the Roman soldiers who would intimidate the Jews or other subjects by forcing them to give up their garments, administering to them undue punishment, or forcing them to carry their belongings far distances. Earlier in this chapter (vv. 10–16), Jesus called those who suffered persecution without retaliating blessed. Continuing His teaching on generosity, Jesus advocates giving to the person who asks us and not refusing or turning away anyone who would borrow from us. This ideal community was what the Lord wants for His people.

43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

The last set of antitheses deals with love and hatred. The theme of generosity, which is the practical dimension of love, is continued in this segment. The command “Thou shalt love thy neighbour” summarizes the Old Testament law (from Leviticus 19:18), but the antitheses, “and hate thine enemy,” is found nowhere in the Scriptures. Rather the Law says that we should love even strangers (Leviticus 19:34). Indeed, the Old Testament commands that we be generous to our enemies (Proverbs 25:21; cf. Romans 12:20). Where then did Jesus get this quote? It must have been a common practice, and as natural during Jesus’ time as it is now for people to love their neighbors but hate their enemies. Other reasoning is that since God advocates love for the “neighbor,” then hatred for the “enemy” is implicit and perhaps sanctioned in the Leviticus passage, which is of course a misinterpretation and found nowhere in Jewish rabbinical literature. The story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (10:25–37) defines the extent of the category of “neighbor.”

44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; 45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Rather than hating your enemies, Jesus advocates that you “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you” (e.g., v. 41), and for those who “persecute you.” Again, instead of hating or planning evil against your enemy, which would seem to be a justified thing to do, Jesus gives a new but radical dimension of the law about loving others. Jesus says that we should “do good to them,” which means do something that will benefit them. Although they may curse us, we should bless them instead. Not only should we love, bless, and do good to those who hate us, but also to those who “despitefully” use us (i.e., accuse us falsely or treat us abusively) or persecute us; we are also commanded to pray for them.

All of this is related to God’s own activity in the world. God’s generosity is demonstrated by His making the sun rise on both the evil and the good, and the rain fall on the just as well as the unjust. Thus, we ought to follow our heavenly Father’s example. By dealing generously with those who hate us, we demonstrate that we are the children of God. Children will often resemble their father or mother. The resemblance is not always usually in the physical appearance, but rather in character and behavior. In most cases, a person’s character can be traced back to their family background. The idea here is not only that the child resembled the parent in appearance, but also that he or she behaves like the parent in character. Thus, Jesus calls on us to resemble our heavenly Father in being loving and generous toward others, even our enemies. Doing this would not only demonstrate our filial relationship with the Father, but also would bring glory to Him (Matthew 5:16).

46 For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? 47 And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?

Jesus reemphasizes this teaching with a number of rhetorical questions. These rhetorical questions point to the fact that Christ’s disciples, both then and now, should live their lives and love in a way that is superior to the normal way of the world around them. They are to go beyond the usual or normal patterns of doing things. For example, it is normal to love people who love you (v. 46) or to “salute” only those who are related or friendly to you. If we only do the same, Jesus asks, “what reward have ye?” or “what reward do you get?” and “what do ye more than others?” since even the tax collectors do the same. The word “reward” here is the Greek word *misthos* (eese-THOCE), which means pay or wages for service done. It can be used in the sense of both bad or good rewards, but is especially used of the rewards that God bestows, or will bestow, upon individuals for good deeds and endeavors. Although the Greek verb *echete* (eh-KEH-tay), meaning “you have” or “you get,” is present tense, it is no doubt futuristic also (e.g., Matthew 6:19-21; we will see this again in our next lesson). It is also worthy to note the KJV translation for verse 47 uses the word “publicans” or tax collectors for the Greek noun *telones* (teh-LOW-nace) while the NLT uses “pagans” for the noun *ethnikos* (eth-nee-KOCE). On the one hand, *telones* is usually translated “publican” (i.e., a tax collector).

Tax collectors were usually Jews appointed by their Roman lords to collect taxes. They were therefore despised by other Jews, perceived as traitors, unclean because of their association with Gentiles, and corrupt because of the dubious ways they collected the taxes (cf. Luke 19:1–9). They were generally regarded as sinful and associated with harlots and other public sinners. Yet, they loved those who loved them—their friends, family members, or fellow tax collectors. They would be similar to a corrupt government official today. On the other hand, *ethnikos* (eth-ni-KAHS), from which we get the word “ethnic,” refers strictly to non-Jews, hence, Gentiles. In the eyes of Jews, Gentiles were pagans, and were regarded as sinners and despised. Therefore, translations of “pagans” or “Gentiles” are preferred translations of the Greek *ethnikoi* (eth-ni-KOY). If Christ’s audience “salutes” (a mark for courtesy and respect) only their own brethren—those who are close to them or, indeed only other fellow disciples—they do not go beyond the status of the pagans, whom they despise. So they need to rise above the status quo if they want to show that they are different and “the children of their Father which is in heaven” (v. 45).

48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

This call for distinction, and indeed the thought of the whole passage, is summarized and capped in this last verse—“be... perfect... as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” It concludes the antitheses (vv. 21–47). The word “perfect” is derived from the Greek *teleios* (TEH-lay-occe), which means complete or full grown and mature, with the idea of completeness (cf. Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 6:1). The idea is borrowed from the Hebrew *tamim* (taw-MEEM), meaning without blemish or spot, complete, full, or undefiled, as in the sacrificial animal (Exodus 12:5). It speaks of being upright and committed to the Lord (Genesis 6:9; Deuteronomy 18:13; 2 Samuel 22:26). No place in the Old Testament is God referred to as being “perfect,” though we read that He is perfect in knowledge (Job 37:16) and perfect in His ways (Psalm 18:30). Instead, He is called “holy” in many passages of the Scripture. Probably, the thought of this last verse is derived from Leviticus 19:2, where “holy” is used rather than “perfect.” Hence, the verse can equally be understood as “Be ye therefore holy, even as your Father which is in heaven is holy.”

We recognize as finite humans we could never be perfect, but are always being perfected. We can walk in sanctification being made more perfect by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can be holy by reflecting the character of God in love, in the way we deal with other people, and the way we lead our lives. Our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20). We are to show favor and not retaliate against those who mistreat us maliciously (vv. 38–42). We are to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors (vv. 43–45); such love should surpass that of the tax collectors and Gentiles (vv. 46–47). When we do these things, we do not only demonstrate that we are the children of our heavenly Father (v. 45) and inherit “the kingdom of heaven” (v. 20), but we will be regarded as perfect (holy)—just as our heavenly Father is holy—and as imitators of God (v. 48). This ultimate goal is what a true child of God should pursue.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Restrain Your Anger
(Leviticus 24:16–22)

TUESDAY

Filled With Grace
(Acts 6:8–15)

WEDNESDAY

Transformed Giving and Praying
(Matthew 6:1–6)

THURSDAY

The Lord Honors Patience
(Lamentations 3:25–33)

FRIDAY

Love Your Neighbors
(Romans 13:1–10)

SATURDAY

The Greatest Commandments
(Matthew 22:34–40)

SUNDAY

Practice Love Toward All
(Matthew 5:38–48)