

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Loving Enemies, Refusing Revenge

Matthew 5:38–48

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage teaches that the people of God are called to renounce personal revenge and to love even their enemies, and that this love is grounded in the very character of God the Father. The old principle of an eye for an eye was given to restrain and proportion justice, not to license private vengeance, and Jesus presses his people beyond even measured retaliation to a love that refuses to repay evil for evil and actively seeks the good of those who wrong us. Crucially, Jesus roots this not in sentiment but in theology: we love our enemies in order to be like our Father, who pours out kindness on the evil and the good alike. Enemy-love is the family resemblance of the children of God.

Be careful to teach this with biblical balance so it is not misheard. Jesus is addressing personal retaliation and the posture of the heart, not abolishing all justice or the God-ordained role of governing authorities, whom Scripture elsewhere says bear the sword to restrain evil (Romans 13:1–4). Turning the other cheek is not a command to enable ongoing abuse or to call evil good; it is the renunciation of personal vengeance and the refusal to let an enemy's evil dictate our response. Make this distinction so that wounded students do not hear Jesus commanding them to remain in harm's way.

The formational aim is to lead students to the specific person they would least like to love, and to help them take a real step toward refusing revenge, praying for that person, and seeking their good. This is the hardest command in the Sermon, and it cannot be met by willpower. So the deepest aim is to ground enemy-love in the gospel, in the staggering truth that God loved us while we were still his enemies and reconciled us through the death of his Son. Only hearts that have received that love can begin to extend it. Keep the tone tender and hopeful; this command wounds before it heals, and your students need to feel both the weight and the grace.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus quotes the “eye for an eye” principle and then calls his followers not to resist the evildoer but to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and give freely (v. 38–42). How does Jesus move his people beyond limited, measured justice to a radical refusal of personal revenge, and what is the difference between this and simply being a doormat?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by clarifying what the eye for an eye principle originally was. Far from licensing revenge, it was a limit on it, ensuring that punishment fit the crime and that a society did not spiral into escalating blood feuds. It was a principle for the courts, restraining vengeance to proportion. By Jesus' day, however, people had twisted it into a personal right to retaliate. Jesus reclaims his people from that distortion entirely.

Walk through the four vivid pictures Jesus gives, and help students see what they have in common. The slap on the right cheek (a backhanded insult), the lawsuit over a tunic, the forced mile of a Roman soldier's demand, the beggar at the door, each is a situation where the natural response is to assert our rights and resist. In each, Jesus calls for a free, surprising, non-retaliatory generosity that refuses to let the offender control our response.

Address the doormat question directly, because it is the honest objection everyone feels. Turning the other cheek is not passive weakness or limp surrender; it is a strong, deliberate refusal to be drawn into the cycle of revenge. Jesus himself, when struck unjustly at his trial, did not silently absorb it but challenged the injustice with dignity (John 18:22–23). The point is the renunciation of personal vengeance, not the abandonment of all justice, dignity, or appropriate protection.

Make the necessary distinction so no one is wounded. This text does not command victims of abuse to remain in danger, nor does it abolish the legitimate role of courts and governing authorities to restrain evil (Romans 13:1–4). It targets the heart's thirst for personal payback. Help your class hold both: a settled refusal to take revenge, and a clear-eyed recognition that loving an enemy is not the same as enabling their evil.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The eye for an eye principle as a limit on revenge, not a license for it
- Free, non-retaliatory generosity that refuses to let the offender control us
- Turning the other cheek as strength, not passive weakness (John 18:22–23)
- The distinction between renouncing revenge and abolishing justice (Romans 13:1–4)
- Loving an enemy without enabling their evil or remaining in harm's way

Discussion Prompts

- How is turning the other cheek different from being a doormat?
- What do Jesus' four pictures have in common?
- How do we refuse personal revenge while still recognizing the place of justice?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about your usual response when someone wrongs or insults you. Where do you find yourself wanting to retaliate, get even, or at least nurse the grudge, and how does Jesus' teaching confront that instinct?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to examine their default response to being wronged. For most of us the instinct to retaliate is immediate and strong, whether through a cutting word, a cold withdrawal, a quiet campaign to damage the offender's reputation, or simply the nursing of a grudge that we rehearse and feed. The question invites honesty about that instinct.

Help students notice the subtler forms revenge takes. We may never strike back physically, but we get even in a hundred quieter ways: the sarcastic remark, the withheld kindness, the score we keep, the satisfaction we feel at another's misfortune. Jesus confronts all of it, because all of it springs from the same refusal to leave vengeance to God.

Move toward the heart, not just the behavior. The goal is not merely to suppress the retaliatory act but to address the desire for payback that drives it. Encourage students to bring that desire honestly to God, to name the grudge they are feeding, and to begin asking God to replace the thirst for revenge with something closer to his own heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining our default response to being wronged
- The subtler forms of revenge: sarcasm, withdrawal, score-keeping, nursed grudges
- Addressing the desire for payback, not just the act
- Leaving vengeance to God (Romans 12:19)

Discussion Prompts

- How do you typically respond when someone wrongs or insults you?
- What subtle forms does your desire to get even take?
- What grudge might you need to bring honestly to God?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus contrasts the common standard, "love your neighbor and hate your enemy," with his own command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (v. 43-44). Why is loving those who love us no real mark of godliness, and what makes love for enemies the true evidence of God's work in a heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center this question on the contrast Jesus draws. The popular ethic, love your neighbor and hate your enemy, divides people into those we will love and those we are free to despise. Jesus erases that line. He commands love for enemies and prayer for persecutors, refusing to let anyone fall outside the reach of our love.

Teach why loving those who love us proves nothing about godliness. Reciprocal love is natural, expected, and universal; even the most hardened sinner loves his friends and family. If our love extends only to those who love us back, we have risen no higher than the people Jesus' hearers most despised. Such love requires no grace and reveals no transformation.

Show why enemy-love is the true mark of God's work in a heart. It is unnatural; it runs against every instinct; it cannot be manufactured by ordinary human warmth. Therefore, when it appears, it testifies to a power beyond the human, to the presence of God's own love poured into a heart by his Spirit (Romans 5:5). Enemy-love is one of the clearest evidences that a person has truly been changed by grace.

Note that the command includes prayer, which is both the means and the proof. It is nearly impossible to keep hating someone you are genuinely praying for. Praying for an enemy's good begins to reshape our hearts toward them, and the willingness to pray sincerely for someone who has wronged us is itself a sign that God is at work. Help students see prayer as the practical doorway into this otherwise impossible love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus erasing the line between neighbor to love and enemy to hate
- Reciprocal love as natural and requiring no grace
- Enemy-love as evidence of God's transforming work (Romans 5:5)
- Prayer for enemies as both the means and the proof of this love
- The unnaturalness of enemy-love pointing to a power beyond ourselves

Discussion Prompts

- Why is loving those who love us no real mark of godliness?
- What makes love for enemies evidence of God's work in a heart?
- How does praying for someone begin to change our hearts toward them?

Question 4

Student Question:

Be honest about whether there is someone you have effectively placed in the "enemy" category, someone you have stopped praying for or wishing well. Who is it, and what would it look like to begin praying genuinely for their good?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to identify whether they have placed someone in the enemy category, someone they have stopped praying for, stopped wishing well, written off as beyond the reach of their love. Often we do this without admitting it, simply by ceasing to bring the person before God in any way but complaint.

Help the class be honest about the telltale signs: a name that tightens the jaw, a person whose misfortune would secretly please us, someone we have quietly decided not to forgive. These are the enemies Jesus is talking about, and they are usually not distant figures but people close enough to have wounded us.

Move toward the concrete discipline of prayer for their good. This is the first and most accessible step, and it is harder than it sounds, because praying sincerely for someone's flourishing is incompatible with hating them. Encourage students to begin, even haltingly, to pray for the actual good of the person they have written off, and to let God use that prayer to soften their hearts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing whom we have quietly placed in the enemy category
- The telltale signs of a heart that has written someone off
- Prayer for an enemy's genuine good as the first step
- Letting prayer soften a hardened heart

Discussion Prompts

- Is there someone you have effectively treated as an enemy?
- Have you stopped praying for them or wishing them well?
- What would it look like to begin praying genuinely for their good?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus grounds enemy-love in the Father, who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” and sends rain on the just and unjust (v. 45). What does this teach us about the character of God, and how does his kindness toward his enemies, including us, become the pattern for our own love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the theological ground Jesus gives: the Father makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. This is what theologians call common grace, God's lavish, undeserved kindness poured out on all people, including those who hate and reject him. The God who could justly withhold every good gift instead floods his enemies with blessing.

Teach that this reveals the very heart of God. He is not grudging or score-keeping in his goodness; he is generous toward the undeserving by his very nature. And here is the staggering part your class must feel: every one of us was once among those enemies. The sun that rose on us, the rain that fell on us, the breath in our lungs, all of it was God's kindness to people who were not yet his friends.

Show how this becomes the pattern for our own love. Jesus' logic is that children resemble their Father. If God loves his enemies with such generous kindness, then his children, to be true children, must love their enemies too. Our enemy-love is not a strange new demand; it is simply acting like the Father whose nature we have come to share.

Help students see that this lifts enemy-love out of gritted-teeth duty into glad imitation. We are not straining to meet an arbitrary standard; we are growing into the family likeness, learning to pour out on others a measure of the same undeserved kindness God has poured out on us. The more deeply we grasp God's kindness to us as his enemies, the more naturally his kindness flows through us to ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's common grace, his kindness poured out on the evil and the good alike (v. 45)
- The generous, non-grudging nature of God's goodness
- Every believer as a former enemy who received God's kindness
- Children resembling their Father as the logic of enemy-love
- Enemy-love as glad imitation rather than gritted-teeth duty

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's kindness to his enemies reveal about his character?
- How does remembering that you were once God's enemy change this command?
- How does enemy-love become imitation of the Father rather than mere duty?

Question 6

Student Question:

Consider how God has treated you, with patience and kindness even in your rebellion against him. How does remembering the way God has loved you as a former enemy change your power and willingness to love the people who have wronged you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question deepens the previous truth by making it personal. The power to love our enemies comes not primarily from trying harder but from remembering how God has loved us. The question asks students to dwell on God's patience and kindness toward them in their own rebellion.

Help them be specific. God did not wait for us to clean ourselves up; he loved us while we were still sinners, still his enemies, and reconciled us at the cost of his Son (Romans 5:8, 10). The patience he has shown us, the offenses he has forgiven, the kindness he has lavished on us when we deserved judgment, all of this is the fuel for our love toward others.

Draw the practical connection. When we hold our enemy's offense in one hand and God's forgiveness of us in the other, the comparison reshapes us. The unforgiving servant of Matthew 18 forgot the enormous debt he had been forgiven; the forgiven heart that remembers cannot easily withhold mercy. Encourage students to let the memory of God's love for them, the former enemy, become the wellspring of their love for the ones who have wronged them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Remembering God's love as the source of power to love enemies
- God loving us while we were still his enemies (Romans 5:8, 10)
- Holding our enemy's offense beside God's forgiveness of us
- The forgiven heart that remembers being unable to withhold mercy

Discussion Prompts

- How has God treated you in your own rebellion against him?
- How does remembering that change your power to love those who wrong you?
- What happens when you hold an offense against you beside God's forgiveness of you?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus points out that even tax collectors and Gentiles love those who love them, so the love he calls for must go further (v. 46–47). How does the distinct, costly love of Christ's people serve as a witness to the watching world, and how is it different from the reciprocal love everyone already practices?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus presses the point with a comparison meant to sting: even tax collectors and Gentiles, the people his hearers considered the lowest, love those who love them and greet their own. If our love rises no higher than theirs, what more are we doing than anyone else? The love of Christ's people must be distinct, or it bears no witness at all.

Teach that this distinct, costly love is one of the church's most powerful testimonies. The world runs entirely on reciprocal love, scratching the backs that scratch ours, loving our tribe and opposing the other. When a community loves across those lines, blessing enemies, forgiving offenders, refusing the cycle of revenge, it displays something the world cannot explain and has never managed to produce on its own.

Connect this to the witness theme from the salt and light lesson. The early church astonished the watching world precisely by loving in ways that made no worldly sense, forgiving persecutors, caring for those who hated them, praying for their executioners. This strange love drew people to ask where it came from, and the answer was always the same: it came from Christ.

Help students see the missional stakes of their ordinary relationships. The way they treat a difficult coworker, an estranged family member, a hostile neighbor is not merely a private matter; it is a public testimony to whether the love of Christ is real. Distinct love is evangelistic; it makes the gospel believable in a way that arguments alone never can.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reciprocal love as no different from what everyone already practices
- Distinct, costly love as the church's powerful testimony
- The early church astonishing the world by its strange love
- The missional stakes of how we treat difficult people
- Distinct love making the gospel believable

Discussion Prompts

- How is the love Jesus calls for different from the love everyone already practices?
- How does costly love for enemies serve as a witness to the world?
- Whose watching eyes might be affected by how you treat a difficult person?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where has your love been merely reciprocal, extended only to those who are easy to love or who can return the favor? Name one person outside that comfortable circle whom God may be calling you to love this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to examine where their love has been merely reciprocal, extended only to the easy-to-love and the able-to-repay. Most of us maintain a comfortable circle of mutual affection and quietly exclude everyone outside it. The question invites attention to that boundary.

Help students identify the people just outside their comfortable circle, not necessarily dramatic enemies, but the difficult, the unpleasant, the ungrateful, the ones who cannot or will not return the favor. These are often the very people Jesus has in view, and the ones our love conveniently skips.

Aim for one person and one concrete act of non-reciprocal love this week. A kindness to someone who cannot repay it, an inclusion of someone usually left out, a blessing toward someone who has been cold. The goal is to push the boundary of our love outward, past the circle of easy reciprocity, into the territory where love begins to look like God's.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining the boundary of our comfortable, reciprocal love
- The difficult and ungrateful as the people Jesus has in view
- One concrete act of non-reciprocal love
- Pushing the boundary of love outward toward God's kind of love

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your love been merely reciprocal, extended only to the easy?
- Who lives just outside your comfortable circle of love?
- What is one act of non-reciprocal love you could offer this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus concludes, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48), summing up not flawless performance but a complete, all-embracing love that mirrors God's own. How is this kind of love impossible by human effort alone, and how does the gospel, the love of God poured into our hearts, make it possible to love as God loves? Connect this to what God has done for us in Christ.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax, and it turns on Jesus' summary command: be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. First, clear away a misunderstanding. The word does not mean flawless, sinless perfection in the sense of never erring. In context it means complete, whole, mature, all-embracing. The Father's love is perfect in that it is complete, leaving no one outside it, falling on the evil and the good alike. To be perfect as he is perfect is to love with that same complete, undivided, all-embracing love.

Now let the weight of it land. Even rightly understood, this command is impossible by human effort alone. No amount of willpower can manufacture genuine love for those who have wounded us; left to ourselves, we can perhaps suppress revenge, but we cannot generate love. If this passage ends with us straining to love our enemies by sheer determination, it ends in despair, because the human heart simply does not contain that love on its own.

This is where the gospel becomes the only hope, and it is a real hope. The same love God commands, he first supplies. God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit

who has been given to us (Romans 5:5). We do not work this love up; we receive it and let it flow through us. The love that loves enemies is, finally, God's own love taking up residence in his children and reaching out through them.

Anchor it all in the cross, the supreme demonstration of enemy-love. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us; while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Romans 5:8, 10). On the cross Jesus prayed for the very men driving in the nails, Father, forgive them (Luke 23:34). The enemy-love Jesus commands he first perfected toward us. We love our enemies because we have been loved as enemies, by a God who gave his Son for the ungodly.

Bring it home with both honesty and hope. Loving our enemies will often be slow, hard, costly work, and the gospel does not pretend otherwise. But it is no longer impossible, because the love required is the love supplied. As we abide in Christ, receive afresh the love that saved us as enemies, and ask his Spirit to love through us, we begin to do the most God-like thing a human being can do: to seek the good of those who have wronged us. This is not the burden it first appears; it is the family likeness of the children of God, growing real in us by grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- "Perfect" as complete, whole, and all-embracing love, not flawless sinlessness
- The impossibility of enemy-love by human effort alone
- God's love poured into our hearts by the Spirit as the supply for the command (Romans 5:5)
- The cross as the supreme demonstration of enemy-love (Romans 5:8, 10; Luke 23:34)
- Loving our enemies because we were first loved as enemies

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus mean by "perfect," and what does he not mean?
- Why is enemy-love impossible by willpower alone?
- How does the love God showed us as enemies become the love we extend to ours?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has called you to the hardest and most God-like thing in the entire Sermon, love for those who have wronged you. Where is he pressing on your heart most, and what is one specific step of enemy-love or refused revenge he is inviting you to take this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone asks students to name where this passage presses on them most and one specific step of enemy-love or refused revenge to take this week. Because this is the hardest command

in the Sermon, resist letting the application stay general; press for the particular person and the particular step.

Help students choose realistically. The step might be a sincere prayer for someone who wronged them, a refusal to retaliate in an ongoing conflict, an act of kindness toward a difficult person, the release of a grudge they have been feeding, or a first move toward an estranged relationship. One real step toward one real person is worth more than a sweeping resolve.

Close with the gospel firmly in view, because this command above all cannot be carried in our own strength. Send students home not crushed by the height of the call but resting in the God who loved them as enemies and who supplies the very love he commands. Remind them that every halting step of enemy-love is a step into the family likeness of their Father, and that his Spirit is at work to make them like him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the specific person and step rather than a general resolve
- A realistic step: prayer, refused retaliation, kindness, released grudge, or reconciliation
- Depending on the gospel for a command beyond our strength
- Each step of enemy-love as growth into the family likeness of the Father

Discussion Prompts

- Where is this passage pressing on your heart most?
- What one step of enemy-love or refused revenge will you take this week?
- How does resting in God's love for you as an enemy make this step possible?