

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 8: Loving Enemies, Refusing Revenge -- Matthew 5:38-48

There is a kind of justice that feels delicious. Someone wrongs us, and we imagine paying them back. We rehearse the cutting reply we should have given. We savor the thought of their comeuppance. Something deep in us insists that the scales must be balanced, that the one who hurt us must hurt in return. The old law even had a measured version of this: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a rule originally meant to limit revenge to fair proportions. But the human heart is forever turning a limit on revenge into a license for it.

Into this Jesus speaks words that have stunned the world for two thousand years. "Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Go the second mile. Give to the one who asks. And then the summit, the verse that towers over the entire chapter: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Not tolerate them. Not avoid them. Love them, and pray for them, the very people who have wounded you, the ones you would most like to see fall.

Why such an outrageous standard? Jesus tells us plainly. "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. He pours out kindness on people who curse him, including, at one time, every one of us. When we love our enemies, we are not being naive or weak; we are doing the family business. We are acting like our Father. We are showing the watching world what God is actually like.

Make no mistake, this is the hardest thing Jesus asks in the entire Sermon, and none of us does it naturally. Right now a face is probably surfacing in your mind, someone who hurt you, betrayed you, still makes your stomach tighten. Jesus is talking about that person. He is not asking you to pretend the wrong did not happen or to call evil good. He is calling you to a love that refuses revenge and seeks the good of even those who have wronged you, the very love God showed you at the cross. Before you read another line, let that face stay in your mind, and ask God for the grace to hear these words not as an impossible burden but as an invitation to become like him.

Group Discussion: Jesus calls his followers not merely to avoid revenge but to actively love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, and he roots this in the character of God the Father. Why is this the hardest command in the whole Sermon, and what does it reveal about God that he would make enemy-love the family resemblance of his children?

Personal Reflection: Let one specific person come to mind, someone who has wronged you or whom you struggle to love. What would it actually look like to refuse revenge, seek their good, and pray for them, and what makes that so difficult for you?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: Romans 12:17-21, never avenging yourselves but overcoming evil with good; Luke 23:34, Jesus praying for those who crucified him; 1 Peter 2:21-23, Christ entrusting himself to God rather than retaliating; Romans 5:8-10, God loving us while we were still his enemies; Proverbs 25:21-22, feeding your enemy and leaving vengeance to God.