

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, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. ⁴⁰ If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. ⁴¹ Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow. 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 that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? ⁴⁸ So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Context

This week’s gospel continues the movement through the first of the Matthean discourses, commonly known as the “Sermon on the Mount” begun on the 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time with the Beatitudes. At a broad stroke, Matthew 5-7 are an expose of Jesus’ authoritative teaching; Chapters 8-9 are pericopes of his authoritative deeds. With the chapters dealing with authoritative teaching, there are four primary themes that emerge:

- 5:3-16 distinctiveness of Christian discipleship
- 5:17-48 disciples: fulfilling the Law (*location of this gospel*)
- 6:1-18 disciples: true and false piety
- 6:19-34 disciples: trust in God over material security

Jesus continued to teach the disciples with the “*You have heard it said... But I say to you*” format from last week. It is part of a series of varied examples of how Jesus’ principles, enunciated in vv. 17–20, work out in practice. And this practical outworking is set in explicit contrast with the ethical rules previously accepted. As we have mentioned before, the Sermon is not a comprehensive manual or rule – not an *ethos* (ethic) of life, but rather the discourse offers a series of illustrations of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. The discourse serves as a means to shape the vision and lenses by which a Christian sees the world and the way to be in the world. It describes what it means to be a covenant people. The Sermon is meant to stimulate the imagination and personal responsibility of freely entering into the covenant relationship with God. It is meant to help the disciple answer the questions, “Who is it that says these things?” and “What does it mean to truly be God’s people?”

There are some commentators who would group vv.33-37 with vv.38-48.

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’ Anything more is from the evil one.

The reason for this is that these verses represent a transition from situations anticipated in the Law – e.g. murder, adultery, and divorce – to actions and locations not discussed in the OT. There is no precedent in the OT for the absolute prohibition of oaths. The Mishnah has entire tractates on oaths (*Shebuoth*) and vows (*Nedarim*). Yet Jesus had provided a vision of discipleship and life that is an antithesis to the hierarchy of truth, witness, and relationships – abolishing the distinction between words that must be true (oaths) and words that must be performed (vows). All speech is to be truthful. All promised action to be performed, not just the ones associated with oaths and vows.

One wonders if the early reader of Matthew was perplexed from the beginning. After all, there are many instances in which a person acts contrary to the understanding of the Law (e.g., Joseph taking Mary into his home) – and is commended. But the trajectory of the Discourse (Sermon on the Mount) leads from actions, anti-thesis, to the fulfillment where the disciple will be judged and measured on love.

Commentary

Jesus' continues to teach with authority (*but I say to you...*) to his disciples even as the crowd listens in (cf. 5:1-2). The fifth example used by Jesus (vv.38-41) is one that perhaps most goes "against the grain" of our human reaction. Here Jesus challenges the idea of retribution, revenge, a tit-for-tat model of justice – and the means by which people seek redress in judicial arenas. For some communities, these verses form the key verses for their belief in non-violent resistance.

Getting Even? Getting Ahead?

There is perhaps no more familiar line from the OT than an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" which often is understood as a sanction for revenge. Here Jesus quotes Exodus 21:24–25 (as well, Lev 24:20; Dt 19:21; cf. Isa 50:4–9; Luke 6:29–30) which expresses the OT principal of proportional retribution in kind (*lex talionis*) considered a principle of legal rights throughout the Ancient Near East. This principle was older and more widely recognized than the Mosaic law, as it was already found in the Code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century BC) with the same examples of *eye* and *tooth*. The codification of proportional retribution was not intended as a sanction for revenge, but to prevent the excesses and escalation of blood-feuds. Proportional retribution was intended to establish a principle wherein the feud was moved from society into the courtroom where the legal system ensured that the punishment did not exceed the crime. Nonetheless, what becomes embedded in society is a form of law seeking justice with some sense of equity. It is an institutionalized limited retribution.

By the Jesus' time, physical penalties had generally been replaced by financial damages. When the idea of compensatory damages replaced a personal retribution, a more "civilized" process seems to be available. But does Jesus have in mind the legal setting? Many of the example that follow do have the "courtroom" setting explicitly stated or at least lurking the background. Jesus never seems to reject the idea of the court room, but one wonders if Jesus intends the community of disciples to have any part of such proceedings. Paul seems to have this same concern in mind in 1 Corinthians 6. It is conceivable that such legal proceedings displace the community's search for God's justice and instead settles for a human justice.

Or is there something deeper here? Is Jesus telling the disciples not to seek to replace one human institution (civil court) with another (religious court) even if one believes the second instance will rightly arbitrate God's will? If true, then far from simply opposing brutality or even physical retaliation, Jesus is teaching the disciples to forego their natural instinct for even legitimate retribution – and he offers alternatives that go "against the grain" of human reaction. But perhaps the "grain" is simply the hardness of the human heart.

"offer no resistance to one who is evil"(v.39).

In the first example (v.39a) Jesus seems to have move beyond retribution and retaliation. The Greek verb *anthistēmi* meaning "set oneself against, oppose, resist" is wider in meaning than "do not retaliate." In the NT the verb most often involves the human opposition to the will of God and can imply more than simple passive resistance. In the OT (LXX) the verb *anthistēmi* is sometimes used for 'take legal action against' – supporting the premise from above about Jesus' teaching to forego even legitimate retribution.

There are some (a minority) exegetes who argue that Jesus is teaching a third way between violent resistance and passive submission: non-violent resistance. Their basis comes from the use of *anthistēmi* in classic Greek literature where the word does find a home in the battlefield setting. Thus some translations suggest “offer no violent resistance” as the better translation – even though “violent” does not appear in the text. Mt 5:39 then becomes a prescription for non-violent resistance. Their argument continues on to suggest that evil (v.39; Jas 4:7) must be countered if justice is to be established. Their argument has merit when one considers that each of Jesus’ example has the disciple taking action (turning the cheek, handing over the cloak, going the additional mile). And the idea has resonance in the light of humanity’s experience: all evil needs in order to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Ironically in our age a common form of non-violent resistance is litigation in the courtroom, something several NT passages may warn against. The US Civil Rights movement in the mid 1960s is an example of a believing community that found warrant for their non-violent resistance in these passages. Given the context of Matthew’s use, other exegetes argue these verses are not a prescription for non-violent resistance but for no resistance at all, even by legal means.

A comparison of the wording of vv. 39–40 with Luke 6:29–30 shows that Matthew’s concern seems particularly focused on cases of litigation rather than with violence, and Mt 5:41 is also concerned with legal rights. All the examples deal with the individual’s response to other individuals (rather than evil in general). A willingness to forgo one’s personal rights, and to allow oneself to be insulted and imposed upon, is not incompatible with a firm stand for matters of principle and for the rights of others (cf. Paul’s attitude in Acts 16:37; 22:25; 25:8–12). Indeed the principle of just retribution is not so much abrogated here as bypassed, in favor of an attitude which refuses to insist on one’s rights, however legitimate. Jesus is not reforming the legal code, but demanding an attitude which can forego personal rights for something greater. Verses 39b–42 are illustrations of that attitude, not rules to be applied.

Turn the other cheek

The words in v.39b have become a common wisdom expression in our day. But our times do not share the same sense of honor/shame operative in 1st century Palestine. To *strike... on the right cheek* is considered to describe a blow with the back of the hand which was a severe affront to one’s honor and dignity (Job 16:10; Lam 3:30). God’s prophets had suffered such ill treatment (1 Kings 22:24; 2 Chron 18:23; Is 50:6) – as would Jesus (26:67). To strike someone so was considered the greatest possible contempt and extreme abuse and as such was punishable by a very heavy fine (*Mishnah BK 8:6*). The situation envisaged in this verse is one of insult rather than of physical violence.

What is Jesus’ larger intent in suggesting such an example as turning the other cheek? Carter (150) suggests that the context is one in which those in power deliberately take an action of power to humiliate the lesser one. In this view, Jesus is teaching passive resistance to ungodly power by an action that refuses submission, asserts dignity and challenges what is supposed to demean – and as well to bring shame upon the person who has delivered the blow. Keener (198) writes that by freely offering the other cheek one demonstrates that one does not value human honor and shows contempt for the value system of the one who delivered the blow – and perhaps the onlookers. Rather, in turning the other cheek you insist that honor before God is the one thing sought; avenging lost human honor has no value at all.

Hand him your cloak as well

Again Jesus returns to the legal setting of the courtroom. The Greek *chitōna* describes the undergarment or tunic worn either against the bare skin or over a linen shirt. The *chitōna* was made of linen or wool, reached to the ankles or knees, had long or half-sleeves, and was worn by both rich and poor. The Greek *himation* is used of garments in general (and in the plural means “clothing”) and

specifically the outer garment, i.e., the mantle or cloak with openings for the arms. Dt 24:10-13 describes the *himation* being used to secure a loan; the cloak must be returned by sundown so that the person has something to keep him warm in the night. But notice that in Mt 5:40 the garment in question is the *chitōna*, the undergarment. In contrast with the eager litigation of his opponent, the disciple should not only willingly be deprived of his *chitōna*, but should add his *himation* (the more valuable outer garment) as a bonus. Jesus has made an absurd example in which the victim ends up naked in the courtroom.

Boring (194) offers that Jesus' intention is not literal but teaches that "a disciple should be secure enough in one's acceptance by God to enable one not to insist on one's rights, legal or otherwise, but empowering one to renounce them in the interest of others." France (2007, p.221) writes that the principle here is not primarily the avoidance of lawsuit since the other person had no legal rights in the court (Ex 22:25-27; Dt 24:10-13). Rather it teaches that what the opponent could not have dared to claim, the disciple is to offer freely – a radically unselfish attitude to one's rights and property. Carter (152) insists that the purpose of Jesus' teaching is literal and that in standing naked (non-violent resistance) in the courtroom one exposes the naked greed of the oppressor. Keener (198-99) agrees that Jesus' words are hyperbole, but says that there are strong elements of honor/shame in play. The ones who value honor and possession more than the kingdom will get what they desire. The ones who focus their desire on the kingdom will inherit eternal life.

Going that extra mile

In contemporary life often the expression "to go the extra mile" implies which someone has asked you to volunteer, one should more than agree and do more than expected or asked. But Jesus is referring to something that is clearly not voluntary service. The phrase "*press you into service*" uses the Greek word *angareuō* which means to "press into compulsory service, or to compel." This was a practice of Roman soldiers taken over from the Persians by which soldiers and government officials could compel citizens of the occupied country to carry load for a prescribe distance. This same verb describes Simon being compelled to carry Jesus' cross. Given the Roman occupation of Palestine, there was no choice but to comply, but the practice was deeply resented by the people. Jesus' suggestion is remarkable in itself, but to do it for the enemy is unheard of.

France (2007, p. 222) offers that this illustrates Jesus' demand to renounce one's rights and prepares the listener for the equally radical demand to love one's enemies (v.44). Keener (200) agrees in this basic assessment and goes so far as to say love commands such actions even if one's contemporaries see your actions as collaboration with the enemy. Carter (152-3) points out that going the first mile can simply be the path of least resistance in the face of oppressing power whose intent is to humiliate. By going the second mile one shows a refusal to be humiliated and takes the imitative to assert human dignity. Given that Roman law limited the service to one mile, Carter suggests this was an strategy of non-violence to change the relationship: perhaps the Roman soldier is now worried that he will be reported as violating the law of occupation. Boring (194) agrees with France and Keener and places it in a broader context: doing more than the law demands.

Give to the one who asks

This last example is an ordinary, everyday occurrence: *Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow* – a request for goods or money from a neighbor or a poor person. From Deuteronomy 15:

⁷ *If one of your kinsmen in any community is in need in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand to him in his need.* ⁸ *Instead, you shall open your hand to him and freely lend him enough to meet his need.* ⁹ *Be on your guard lest, entertaining the mean thought that the seventh year, the*

*year of relaxation, is near, you grudge help to your needy kinsman and give him nothing; else he will cry to the LORD against you and you will be held guilty.*¹⁰ *When you give to him, give freely and not with ill will; for the LORD, your God, will bless you for this in all your works and undertakings.*¹¹ *The needy will never be lacking in the land; that is why I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman in your country.*

Jesus' injunction reflects the generosity envisioned in Dt 15:7-11 for helping a fellow Israelite in need, but is more open-ended (cf. Luke 6:30) – not limiting the injunction to a fellow Israelite. Luke is more far-reaching: 'Give (regularly: present imperative) to everyone who asks of you.' Matthew envisages a specific instance (*give* is aorist imperative, normally of a single act). Literal application of this verse as a rule of life would be self-defeating: there would soon be a class of saintly paupers, owning nothing, and another of prosperous idlers. But the principle is that the need of others comes before my convenience (cf. Deut. 15:7–11). The point being made is that in the kingdom of heaven self-interest does not rule – not our legal rights, nor our possessions – all give way to the interest of others.

Interim thoughts

As seen in the commentaries of four exegetes (Boring, Carter, France and Keener) what one understands from this part of the Sermon on the Mount depends upon the accent that one places on the text. Carter clearly presses the perspective of justice's demands and the means to bring about justice in a world where social, economic and political power are maldistributed. The others accent the role of discipleship of the individual in seeking the righteousness of Christ and show a dependence upon Christ to establish justice. These exegetes seem to say that to turn the other cheek is not to shame the opponent or win him/her over, to cause the enemy to repent. Going the extra mile is not a matter of prudence calculated to keep a low profile when you do not have power and need to "get along." These sayings express the inherent rule of the kingdom of God and are God's ultimate way of dealing with humanity exhibited in the life and death of Jesus. They do not necessarily make sense. They are not reasonable in the eyes of the world. They are challenges that ask us whether we are oriented to the God who has redefined power and kingship in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

R.T. France (1989, pp.130-31) nicely comments on Jesus' teaching:

These verses list four concrete situations in which Jesus' general teaching on non-retaliation applies... The first (5:39b) seems to picture a personal dispute that leads to an insulting back-hand slap by a right-handed person to the right cheek of another person... The second (5:40) speaks of a legal dispute in which one is ordered to forfeit one's shirt to supply collateral for a debt or satisfy a claim for damages. The third situation (5:41) envisions an occupying Roman soldier conscripting a Jewish person to carry his equipment (cf. 27:32). In each situation Jesus commands his disciples to go beyond the expected response. Instead of angrily slapping the aggressor back, the disciple is to allow himself to be slapped again on the other cheek. Instead of standing up for his rights with further litigation, the disciple is to give up his coat ... as well as his shirt. Instead of resisting occupying military forces, the disciple is to help them by carrying their equipment two miles instead of one. The point of the first three situations is that the disciple is not to be a part of furthering the usual chain of evil action and reaction in this fallen world.

The fourth example (5:42) takes the teaching of Jesus one step further. Not only is a disciple to be non-retaliatory when injured, he or she is to be generous to those who are in need (cf. Luke 6:34–35). Not only must disciples not further evil by retaliation, they must further good in the world by benevolence. This teaching is in keeping with OT law (cf. esp. Deut 15:7–11; also Lev 25:35–55). At his own arrest and trials Jesus exemplified the essence of what is taught here (26:67; 27:11–13, 35; cf. Mark 14:65; John 18:22–23; 19:3; 1 Pet 2:23).

But these four examples should not be taken in a doctrinaire fashion that would limit their intended application. One may never need to physically turn the other cheek, give up one's coat, or go an extra mile, but one must be willing to unselfishly suffer personal loss with faith that the heavenly Father will meet one's needs and deal with the injustice in his own time.

Love Extends to the Enemy

The opening phrase, *You shall love your neighbor* is from Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus quotes in a fuller form at 19:19 and 22:39. The prominence of the commandment to love in Jesus' teaching, and especially in Matthew's presentation of it, is well known. Here the question is the extent of its application (as in Luke 10:25–37, where the parable of the Good Samaritan is also introduced as a comment on Lev. 19:18). The *neighbor* of Leviticus 19:18 was the fellow-Israelite, but a very different attitude was required towards those of a hostile community (Deut. 23:3–6; cf. Ps. 139:21–22), even though a personal enemy was to be treated with consideration (Exod. 23:4–5; 1 Sam. 24:19; Prov. 25:21) and an individual non-Israelite was to be made welcome (Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19).

There is no command to hate the enemy in the Old Testament, yet there are statements that God "hates all evildoers" (Ps 5:5; cf. 31:6) and statements that imply that others do, and should do, the same (Deut 23:3-7; 30:7; Pss 26:5; 139:21-22). The primary meaning is not aimed at personal vindictiveness or disdain, but at the religious rejection of those who do not belong to God's people and keep God's law. The group of insiders to be loved is constituted by the religious community; outsiders who are "hated" are those who do not belong."

The Matthean Jesus makes love of God and neighbor the fundamental command on which all else depends, and makes the command to love enemies specific and concrete – the litmus test if you will. In its absoluteness and concreteness, it is without parallel in Hellenistic culture or Judaism. The command should not be understood only abstractly, "love all people, including even enemies." In Jesus' situation it referred particularly to the occupying Roman forces, and thus to national enemies as well as to competing religious groups and personal enemies. For Matthew the focal instance was the concrete situation of the persecuted Matthean community in its time.

But such a concrete point of orientation then moves universally so that love (*agape*) reigns above all. Jesus bases the command not on a humanitarian ideal, a doctrine of human rights, or a strategy or utilitarian purpose (to win the enemy over) but

- (a) only on his authority to set his own command in juxtaposition to the Law (5:43),
- (b) on the nature of God who loves all impartially (5:45), and
- (c) on the promise of eschatological reward (5:46).

The idea of reward is not mere selfishness, but a dimension of Jesus' fundamental proclamation of the present and coming kingdom as the basis for the radical life-style to which he calls his disciples. Thus "*that you may be children [huiou] of your heavenly Father*" also represents Matthew's inaugurated eschatology: Your conduct must be appropriate to your status as sons/children of God, which you already are (6:4, 6; cf. v. 18), and which will be revealed and acknowledged by God at the last judgment (cf. 5:9). And this love will issue in prayer for the persecutors; it is not just a sentimental feeling, but an earnest desire for their good.

So what if you love only as everyone else?

These verses develop the idea of loving one's enemies by first comparing such love to God's love for people (5:45) and then by asking two rhetorical questions that call on disciples to practice a higher righteousness than tax collectors and pagans do (5:46–47). A parochial concern is characteristic of the world. If a disciple is to find his *recompense*, he must not just be on a level with other men; he must *do more* (cf. v. 20, where the same root *perisson* is used, and the ultimate development of this *more* in the

perfect of v. 48). *Tax collectors* and *Gentiles* are bracketed together again in 18:17. The (Jewish) tax collectors, as an ostracized minority, formed a close-knit group. Jesus' positive attitude elsewhere to tax collectors (9:9–13; 11:19; 21:31–32) and Gentiles (8:10–11) contrasts with the pejorative use of the terms here and in 18:17; their use as colloquial expressions, readily understood in current Jewish society, for 'outsiders' or 'undesirables' cannot therefore be pressed into an endorsement of the very type of discrimination which it is the aim of these verses to condemn. *Brothers* will in context denote primarily fellow-disciples, as generally in Matthew: the love Jesus requires extends outside the 'in-group' to its opponents.

Summary

The 'greater righteousness' demanded in v. 20 has been illustrated in vv. 21ff., and is now summed up (*therefore*) in one all-embracing demand. The demand is that disciples (*you* is emphatic, in contrast with the tax collectors and Gentiles of vv. 46–47 and the scribes and Pharisees of v. 20) must be *perfect* (*teleioi*). This is the 'more' required in v. 47. Cf. 19:20–21, where again *teleios* (its only other use in Matthew) indicates God's requirement which goes beyond legal conformity. (There too Lev. 19:18 is superseded by this more radical demand.) *Teleios* is wider than moral perfection: it indicates 'completeness', 'wholeness' (cf. Paul's use of it for the spiritually 'mature' in 1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Phil. 3:15), a life totally integrated to the will of God, and thus reflecting his character. It is probably derived here from the LXX of Deuteronomy 18:13, which, with the repeated formula of Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26 ('You shall be holy, for I am holy'), is echoed in Jesus' words. The conformity to the character of God, to which Israel was called in their role as God's special people (see especially Lev. 20:26), is now affirmed as the goal of the disciples of Jesus. It is an ideal set before all disciples, not a special status of those who claim to have achieved 'sinless perfection' in this life; neither here nor in 19:20–21 is there a suggestion of a two-level ethic for the ordinary disciple and the 'perfect'.

Notes

Matthew 5:39 offer no resistance: The Greek verb *anthistēmi* means "set oneself against, oppose, resist" The 14 occurrences in the NT are all middle in meaning (i.e., not causative). The verb frequently refers to human opposition to God, God's messengers, God's will, etc. (Acts 13:8; Rom 9:19; 13:2; 2 Tim 3:8; 4:15; cf. Luke 21:15; Acts 6:10), but is also used with reference to evil that one is not to resist here in Mt 5:39); at the same time, it is appropriate to oppose evil absolutely (Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9; cf. also Eph 6:13). Paul uses the verb to describe his behavior toward Peter in Antioch (Gal 2:11: lit. "I opposed him to his face"). *one who is evil* represents the same ambiguous phrase as in v. 37, but the context here, with the following series of *if any one* ... clauses, suggests that it is right to take it of an individual wrongdoer rather than of 'evil' as a principle, still less of 'the Evil One'.

strike...on the right cheek: the back-handed slap is assumed and is based upon what is necessary for a right-handed person to strike another on their right cheek.

Matthew 5:41 mile: the word *milion* means 1,000 paces, a distance somewhat less than a standard mile.

Matthew 5:43 hate: in biblical parlance does not necessarily imply personal hostility, but may mean "not choose; consider an outsider" (cf. Matt 6:24; Luke 14:26; Rom 9:13)

Matthew 5:46 pray for those who persecute you: Praying for one's persecutors is a striking demonstration of one's love for them (cf. Luke 23:34; Acts 7:59–60). This, too, is anticipated in the OT (Gen 20:17–18; Exod 23:4–5; Num 12:13; 21:7; 1 Sam 24:17–19; Job 31:29; Ps 7:3–5; Prov 24:17–18; 25:21–22; Jer 29:7; Jonah 4:10–11).

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