

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 5:38-48**

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"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;  
and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your  
cloak as well;  
and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.  
Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who  
wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'  
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,  
so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;  
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,  
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?  
Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?  
Do not even the Gentiles do the same?  
Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount is the climax of Jesus' reinterpretation of the law. The two themes of this section of Jesus' teaching are the law of retaliation and the law of loving your neighbor and hating your enemy. First some observations about the structure of this section in order to facilitate interiorization and being able to tell this by heart.

Once again this section on retaliation has two episodes composed of two periods. The first has the formula, "you have heard that it was said...but I say to you." The second is a series of examples of what this principle would mean in practice. There are three examples of non-retaliation; strike on the right cheek, anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, and anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second. The second period is about giving, giving to those who beg and not refusing anyone wants to borrow. If you outline those episodes, they are easy to remember.

The climax of this section of commentary on the Mosaic law is the reinterpretation of the tradition of loving the neighbor and hating the enemy. The first episode restates this and develops his reinterpretation—"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"—in relation to being like God, "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes His sun rise and sends rain." The second commentary is two rhetorical questions, "If you love those who love you, what reward you have? Do not

even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" Again, a similar structure, "for if you love those/if you greet those, and do not even the tax collectors/do not even the Gentiles do the same." The climax of the entire section is then, "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

A comment about this translation of the Greek word *teleios*, which is translated here as "perfect:" *Teleios* is related to the concept of the end. The *teleios* is the completion of something. Another translation of Jesus' saying would be: "be mature, be grown-up, be complete, be a full adult, as your heavenly Father is complete, mature." The concept that underlies this word is not perfection as the fulfillment of an ideal but rather as the completion of a process of growth or completion. In this case Jesus is recommending the achievement of full maturity in the practice of God's will. That is, the purpose of the law is that our actions would be completely conformed to God's will and purpose.

Now a return to the law of retaliation: The *lex talionis* set limits on the degree of retribution.: "You have heard that it was said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This was in contrast to ancient practice of retaliating for the loss of an eye by killing the opponent or burning down a village for an insult or injury by one warrior. But Jesus' teaching is not to mirror evil with evil but to confront the wrong without violence. "But I say to you do not resist (with force) an evil one. But if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

This saying has usually been translated as: "do not resist one who is evil." But the meaning of the verb is usually "counteractive aggression," or "violent resistance." So the meaning is: "do not resist with violence or force one who is evil" but find a third way, neither passive acceptance, nor violent resistance.

Jesus' focus is not to retaliate by doing nothing but rather to confront an evildoer non-violently. This is not the same as passivity. Jesus' recommendation is not to do nothing and to simply absorb whatever an abuser wants to do. The goal of an evildoer is to humiliate and require submission. Each of Jesus' examples is a response of non-violent resistance to an evildoer. The examples Jesus gives are such third way responses.

The cheek: in the first case, "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek" rather than hitting them back or hitting them even harder, as is contemporary practice in relation to a response to attacks, turn the other cheek and require them to strike you on the other cheek but without bowing the head or signaling submission. To turn the other cheek is to refuse submission and to force them into the shameful action of striking you again. The goal of this practice is to bring shame on the one who is doing this evil and to demonstrate its wrong. It's a counsel to refuse humiliation and subjugation by forcing the other to experience the shame of what he is doing.

The garment: the practice that Jesus recommends is a radical non-violent courtroom demonstration. If a poor person was sued for his garments, the law in Exodus and Deuteronomy forbid the taking of that person's last piece of clothing. It was strictly required that this garment was returned at night. Jesus is recommending that, if a rich person sues a poor person for their next-to-last garment, you take off your other garment in court and give it to them as well. In other words, strip naked and require this rich suitor to experience the shame of requiring a person to have no clothes at all and thereby break the law. It is nonviolent, highly aggressive action that would bring shame on the suitor.

The carrying of soldier's baggage: the armies of the ancient near East traveled by foot. One of their most hated practices was to require people in the lands that they were passing through and generally conquering to carry their 75 or 85 pound packs. In order to limit this practice and the resentment of subject peoples, the Roman government required that a soldier would be allowed to require someone to carry their pack only one mile. If then someone who was required to carry it one mile carried it two miles, it was a violation of Roman law. It was an extension of the logic of domination in a manner that put the soldier at risk of sanction by his commanders. So, "Okay you require me to carry your pack one mile? I'll carry it two miles and thereby put you in a position of having violated Roman law and even common sense justice."

In each of these instances Jesus is not recommending passive response, that is simply accepting whatever actions of subjugation and humiliation that an evildoer will seek to inflict, nor is he recommending a violent counterattack. Jesus' recommendation is to find a third way that demonstrates nonviolently the injustice of what is being done.

The word about giving to everyone who begs and refusing loans to no one was an encouragement to give alms to the poor and loans to everybody. This was a way of coping with the debt crisis of the poor that was a characteristic problem in the Galilee of Jesus' day. It is a radical solution to the problem of indebtedness, i.e., everybody share with everyone. And apparently the church in Jerusalem after Pentecost not only got the message but followed Jesus' suggestion. It was a way of dealing with the most systemic problem that poor people faced. The probability is that Jesus' listeners, when they heard Jesus' responses to the situations they faced, would have laughed or at least smiled at this new way of thinking about the reversals of logic implicit in Jesus' teaching. It is also apparent that some of them took Jesus seriously and began to do what he suggested.

The climax of this section is Jesus' reframing of the tradition that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. His reinterpretation is "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." This is a radical redefinition of both the laws of Israel and of the practices of the armies of the ancient near East. Virtually everyone, then and now, practiced the hate of the enemy. Loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you was a radical reversal of this practice in the ancient world. It is the most specific example of Jesus' recommendation in relation to peacemaking and it is a blessing of those who take these

actions. One of the ways in which Matthew's story develops is that Jesus does in later episodes what he taught. One could summarize Jesus' strategy with the saying, "Heal your enemy" And in specific stories—the servant of the centurion in Capernaum (8.4-13), the Gerasene demoniacs (8.28-34), the Canaanite woman (15.21-28)—Jesus does precisely what he recommends here. He does good for his enemies.

The announcement in Jesus' first sermon in Luke in his home synagogue is that his mission will follow the pattern of Elijah and Elisha who fed a widow in Zephath in the land of Sidon and healed Naaman, the general of the Syrian army. In both instances, Jesus' teaching in Nazareth was that the kingdom of God is good news for our enemies as well as for the people of Israel. The principle of peacemaking that Jesus demonstrates in the aftermath of this teaching is healing his enemies and doing good for those who hate him.

These are actions that refuse to be determined by the system of military and economic power that was characteristic of the Roman Empire. Jesus' words about loving your enemy were an extension to human practice of the logic of God's goodness. That is, since God is good to those who do evil as well as those who do good, we also ought to follow the example of God who does good to all and whose desire is peace for all. The completion of the logic of the kingdom of heaven is therefore that to be complete, mature, full-grown adults, perfect in the sense of having attained the end or purpose of human life, is not to pursue the mentality of the warrior who becomes a hero by killing the enemy. It is rather that completeness and maturity is evidenced in loving the enemy, in finding ways of non-violent resistance to evil that will in turn create the possibility of a peaceable kingdom on earth. According to Jesus, the formation of a non-violent practitioner of the law of love is the fulfillment of God's purpose for every adult human being.

It is striking that this definition of a mature and complete man and woman remains as radical a redefinition of human maturity now as it did 2000 years ago. We celebrate warriors as our greatest heroes now as we did then. And in our games, our movies, and our national stories, we teach young men and increasingly women that the way to be a great human being, that is, "to be all you can be," is to be a warrior whose basic training is to learn how to hate and to kill the enemy. Jesus taught and practiced another way of becoming a complete human being.