

## Trusting God and Loving Others Matt. 5:38-48

**Intro.** We've been working our way through that section of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus sought to correct and clarify the meaning of God's commands. 6x's Jesus said, "**You have heard it was said,**" followed by "**But I tell you...**" With the passage of time, God's expectations for His people had degenerated into a heartless checklist of do's and don'ts. Manmade interpretations and traditions were substituted for true faith and heart allegiance. When asked why His disciples ate with unwashed hands, Jesus replied, "**Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men....' 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!'**" – Mark 7:6-9 So here in **Matt. 5**, Jesus breathed new life into six of God's commands. He didn't set aside or change these laws. Instead, He raised the bar higher by explaining the spirit of the law or what God intended. The impact of **vs. 21-48** can be described this way...Jesus said, "*You have heard and been taught many things, but here is what my Father meant....*" The first four commands can be summarized this way...

- In **vs. 21-26** – Jesus said, beyond actually killing somebody...kingdom people don't harm others by resentment / harbored anger / hatred / and evil speaking.
- In **vs. 27- 30** – He said, not only are kingdom people innocent of adultery, by their hearts and minds are pure and free from sexual fantasy.
- In **vs. 31-32** – He said not only do kingdom people not divorce, but they lovingly protect their marriage partner. They honor their vows by living together in faithfulness until separated by death.
- Then in **vs. 33-37** – Jesus said, beyond breaking promises, their word is their bond. They are completely honest and dependable. Their "yes" means "yes" and their "no" means "no."

Now in **vs.38-48** Jesus cites two other commands the Jews had either changed or misinterpreted. Yet our response to these commands raises some deeper questions. The first can be stated this way...

### **1. Do I trust God to protect and vindicate me?**

In **Deut. 32:25** the Lord told His people, **It is mine to avenge; I will repay.** That's God command. But the rule most people live by is..."*don't get mad, get even!*" The NT command to **overcome evil with good** and the concept of suffering loss rather than demanding our rights is like Swahili to an English speaking American! Who lives that way? Who turns the other cheek? Who goes the extra mile? Who surrenders more than what he's sued for? Who gives generously and indiscriminately? Not us! We have our rights! We hold our ground and protect our stuff.

But Jesus said citizens of His kingdom will be **salt** and **light** in this world. Instead of blending in, His followers are called to stand out from the crowd as we live in a way that is different and distinct from everyone else. And nowhere is the difference more apparent than when we surrender rights others are so passionate to claim. At no time does our light shine more brightly than when we refuse to retaliate because we trust God to make things right. So Jesus said,

**a. You have heard that it was said... – vs. 38 - "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'**"

The law referred to here is called *lex talionis* or the law of retaliation. This law appears 3x's in the OT. (**Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; and Deut. 19:21**). An **eye for an eye** causes some to criticize the OT as being harsh and blood thirsty. But *lex talionis* was actually the beginning of mercy. Let me explain.

**First**, God never intended for individuals in conflict to privately enforce this law. The law didn't authorize victims to act as vigilantes who take matters into their own hands. An eye for an eye was a regulation given to guide Jewish courts and judges when settling disputes.

**Second**, *lex talionis* insists that *punishment should correspond in degree and kind to the offense committed*. For example...if a man struck another man and blinded him in one eye, the lost eye was worth an eye and nothing more. The same was true when a tooth was knocked out or a leg was broken. So *lex talionis* put limits on retaliation. This regulation was necessary because human nature is vengeful. Angry people want a pound of flesh for an ounce of damage!

An example of excessive retaliation is recorded in **Gen. 34**. **Shechem** was a son of the Hivite ruler, **Hamor**. His passions were aroused when he saw **Dinah**, who was one of Jacob's daughters. Unable to control his passions, he raped her. Enraged by this violent crime, **Simeon** and **Levi** devised a sinister plot to avenge their sister. They told **Shechem** and his father that **Dinah** would be permitted to marry **Shechem** and free trade between the Jews and the Hivites would be sanctioned if all the men of their city were circumcised. The men agreed. On the third day after surgery when the men were weakened by pain and unable to defend themselves, Simeon and Levi drew their swords and slaughtered them all. Prior to the giving of *lex talionis*, the crime of one man was avenged by the execution of an entire city of men! Later when Jacob blessed his sons, he had no blessing for Simeon and Levi because their swords had been used as weapons of violence. (**Gen. 49:5-7**)

The fact is...most people aren't satisfied to "get even"...we want more than that. Dutch Schultz and Al Capone had no interest in "getting even," they wanted to get ahead. The same was true for the Barzini's and the Corlione's / and the infamous Hatfield's and McCoy's. Vengeance meant taking more than was lost. So *lex talionis* regulated retaliation to prevent it from becoming excessive and to prevent petty disputes from escalating into all out war.

**Third**, the eye for eye regulation didn't demand or mandate retaliation. It merely specified what was just and fair if the victim pressed charges. In other words, the law didn't force victims to "get even." Like the divorce allowance of **Deut. 24**, retaliation isn't the only option. The right to retaliate in kind could be waved in favor of mercy and forgiveness. **Prov. 19:11** says, **A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense**. So the eye for eye regulation put limits on what a just settlement might look like. But Jesus recommends another option...a better way...the way of mercy and forgiveness...God's way.

But the fact remains, when Jesus came on the scene the virtues of mercy and forgiveness were all but forgotten. The Jews had adopted the vengeful ways of Babylon Assyria / Persia / and Greece. When Jesus gave this sermon, his audience was oppressed and brutalized by the Romans. Hearts were hardened by mistreatment. Many had become fearful / on guard / and hyper-sensitive about the few rights they had. The notion that God could be trusted to protect His people seemed irrational and foolish. Instead of a judicial formula for the courts, *lex talionis* had become the rule of life. Instead of limiting penalties, an eye for an eye had become license to retaliate...authorization to get even. If you put out my eye, the law says I can put out yours! If you break my leg, I can break yours. As you can imagine, this merciless attitude didn't make for "a beautiful day in the neighborhood." It promoted hatred between families and rivalry between tribes. The intention of God's law was circumvented by the selfish desire to "get even."

**b. But I say to you – vs. 39-42 - But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**

The ethic Jesus set forth here is radical and shocking. In the context of these verses, **do not resist** means, don't retaliate...don't seek to get even! Jesus wasn't talking about defending yourself when an intruder has broken into your house or when somebody you love is threatened by bodily harm. He wasn't talking about people summoned to fight in the service of their country. He was talking about the vast assortment of personal disputes that arise in the course of daily life. In these everyday situations, people under the rule of King Jesus won't demand an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. Jesus then fleshed out this ethic of non-resistance and non-retaliation by four examples.

**Example #1 – vs.39b - If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.**

This takes some analysis which others have done for us. Since 90% of the world's population is right handed, a slap on the right cheek would have to be a back-handed slap. Are you with me? (With your right hand, slap the person seated next to you...I'm just kidding!) In the Middle East, a back-handed slap wasn't done to inflict pain or harm. It was meant to be the ultimate insult! To be slapped with the back of the hand meant your crime was reprehensible...you are nothing...you are a non-person. So what Jesus meant here has to do with the way His people respond to an insult. In other words, when insulted, kingdom people don't retaliate! Our example is King Jesus Himself. **1 Pet.2:23 - When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.** Just two verses earlier Peter wrote...**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. (vs. 21)** When insulted, Kingdom people take their cues from the King we love and serve. To follow in Christ's steps is to refrain from retaliation.

**Example #2 – vs. 40 - And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.** A **tunic** was like a night shirt. It was a long loose fitting under-garment. The average person owned several **tinics**. The law allowed a plaintiff to take a tunic if the defendant had no money or assets with which to pay a debt. From this law comes the expression ... *"he lost his shirt!"* In that day, most people had only one **cloak** or outer-garment. The law allowed a **cloak** to be taken as well as a **tunic** but with this proviso...a **cloak** had to be returned at dusk. Why?... because a **cloak** also served as a blanket that protected its owner from the elements. To force a debtor to spend the night without his **cloak** was considered excessive punishment. But here Jesus made a startling demand of His followers. They must reverse the dynamic. Instead of defending themselves or claiming their rights, they must be willing to surrender something more than their accuser demands. They must suffer loss and go beyond the letter of the law. I'm not sure the word "radical" is strong enough to describe this teaching. But Jesus said this is how Kingdom people respond when sued. They do this because they trust God in sovereign grace will take care of them and meet their needs.

**Example #3 – vs. 41 - If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.** Under Roman rule, the Jews were obligated to feed / provide lodging / and do almost anything a Roman soldier ordered them to do. An example is Simon the Cyrene who was forced to carry our Savior's cross. The Jews hated nothing more than Rome's occupation and ruthless control over them! When Jesus said, **"the truth will set you free"**...they proudly snarled, **"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone."** - **Jn. 8:32, 33** (I guess they meant, *"We've never been slaves of anyone... except for the Egyptians / Babylonians / Assyrians / Greeks / and oh, yes, the Romans...aside from those Gentile powers, we've never been anyone's slave!"*)

Once again, what Jesus taught here was radical. **If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.** With a smile on your kisser and a spring in your step, Jesus said, His people will do more than they're obligated to do. The Jews knew a mile was precisely 1,000 steps. They begrudgingly counted every one of them before dumping the soldier's pack! But Jesus said, *"Go the extra mile and watch his jaw drop instead!"* Surprise your superior by doing more than he requires! Do what he demands joyfully and with the humility of a servant. Be a beacon of God's love to those who enjoy bossing you around. As you do this, remember...you're a child of the King. His grace has set you free to do even more than the law requires.

**Example #4 – vs.42 - Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**

The law Jesus referenced here is stated in **Deut. 15:7-10 - If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in every-thing you put your hand to.**

According to God's Sabbath law, debts were cancelled every 7th year. Borrowers loved this provision in God's law! That meant that when year 7 rolled around, my weed-wacker became his weed-wacker! It meant the 50 bucks loaned the month before was forgiven. Cancelled meant cancelled! As you can imagine, loaners became increasingly tight-fisted in year #6 and borrowers came out of the wood-work. But here Jesus says Kingdom people will be generous givers irrespective of the calendar. They will be open-handed and responsive to the needs of neighbors around them. This ethic of generosity reverberates throughout the Bible. It originates in the character of God who is a giver.

So, when insulted, turn the other cheek / when sued, hand over your cloak as well as your tunic / when forced to go a mile, go two / and give to the less fortunate even when repayment isn't likely. Now some wacky preacher didn't make this up...It's the unvarnished ethic taught by Jesus. Do Christians actually live this way? Can we cite 10 examples of believers who obeyed this teaching? How about 5? Well, how about just one? To live this way seems irrational in a world where everybody claims their rights and we can "*call Lee free.*" So how do these teachings sit with you? Perhaps we haven't taken Jesus seriously. Perhaps this is why our salt isn't so salty and our light isn't so bright.

Do you know why Jesus was able to face such terrible insulting abuse without retaliating? The answer is in **I Pet. 2:23 - When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted himself to Him who judges justly.** Jesus entrusted...He put his whole life in the hands of His Father who **judges justly**. He trusted His Father to protect and vindicate Him. Do you trust God that much? In the issues of life, do you defer your case to His supreme court and trust the Lord to make all things right? But there's a second question...

## **2. Do I love others the way God does? – vs. 43-47**

**a. You have heard that it was said... – vs. 43 – "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'**

You may be thinking, I never saw that in the OT! That's because it isn't there! Here's a case where God's law suffered some serious editing. **Lev. 19:18** says, "**Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.**" No matter how carefully this verse is examined, no one can find the part that says it's OK to hate enemies. What we have here is a clear example of revelatory modification! In the process of time, God's people actually reduced God's Word to a standard that made more sense to them. But the alteration didn't stop there. One day Jesus had a conversation with one of Israel's legal experts. The lawyer confessed that God's law requires us to "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind**"; and, "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**"

From the fog of legalese he raised a question that was the subject of endless debate. He asked, "**And who is my neighbor?**" (**Lk.10:27-29**) The Jews had wrestled with this question for centuries. But let me ask...is the word **neighbor** difficult or confusing? Do we need a dictionary?

I love the way Jesus responded. He answered the lawyer's question with the parable of the Good Samaritan followed by a question. You know the story. At the end of the story Jesus asked,..."**Which of these three** (priest, Levite, or Samaritan) **do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?**" You see, the question, **Who is my neighbor?** was just smoke...it was empty rhetoric. The true question Mr. Lawyer is this..."*Who are you willing to be neighborly to?*" To the Samaritan, a **neighbor** was anyone he came in contact with...anyone in need ...anyone God holds us responsible to love as we love ourselves. The priest and Levite didn't see it that way.

By the time Jesus came, the Jews had altered, modified, and redefined the terms of God's law to such a degree, it exempted them from the responsibility to love almost everybody. It gave them license to hate anybody they disliked / disagreed with / or considered their enemy. They may have felt some slight obligation to love their next door neighbor, but certainly not the Samaritan neighbor... certainly not the Italian or Greek neighbor. Once again, Jesus exposed the emptiness of their religion.

**b. But I tell you - vs. 44 -47 - But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?**

The Greeks had several different words for **love**. The Greek word here is *agape*. *Agape* is the unique love of God. It's the same love of **Jn.3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** *Agape* love is selfless sacrificial concern. It's an active love that does no harm but does things to benefit the ones loved. Jesus didn't say we have to like our enemies...He said we must love them. We must **pray** even for those who persecute us! Have you noticed how hard it is to hate somebody you sincerely and regularly pray for? We may hate what they do or hate what they've done...we may hate what they stand for and believe...but Jesus said His people will love them just as God does.

**v.45** explains why we must love them - **that you may be sons of your Father in heaven**. Does this mean love for enemies qualifies us to become God's sons and daughters? No! We become God's children by trusting Christ who died to save us. **Jn. 1:12 – Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—**So if loving enemies isn't a salvation requirement, what did Jesus mean? The phrase **son of** is a Semitic idiom which was equivalent to saying, "*like father, like son.*" It signified the similarities between a father and his child. It meant the child shares the same characteristics as the Father. They look alike. They have the same disposition. They act the same way. To hear one is to hear the other. That's what **son of** meant. The focus of **v.45** isn't on obtaining a relationship with God. The focus is on being a person who shares the characteristics of God. We love our enemies to be like our Father in heaven.

This being the case, what's so special about God's kind of love? **v.45** continues - **He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**. The fact is this...God graciously gives good things even to those who rebel against Him. God's sun rises and shines as much on Bill Nye as it does Ken Hamm. He sends rain on Republicans and Democrats. (I know that's hard to believe but its true!). God's love is indiscriminate. He loves the world of sinners... the unrighteous as well as the unrighteous made righteous by His saving grace.

So if we want to be like God...if we want to share His characteristics...what will we do? We will love others the way He does. We won't pick and choose favorites. Our hearts will be open to everyone.

We'll realize that God loved us when were ungodly / sinners / and His enemies. **Rom. 5:8** says, **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** Jesus then posed two rhetorical questions which expose the narrowness of our love:

**First, v.46 - If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?** Tax collectors were hated. They were men who “sold out” to Rome. They collected the tax Rome demanded and lined their pockets with surcharges. Yet even these selfishly motivated traitors loved those who loved them. There’s no reward for loving people who love...people who are easy to love. That sort of love is ordinary. God calls us to love in a way that’s uncommon.

**Second, v.47 - And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?** Even godless pagans know how to win friends and influence people. They know how to get ahead in the world. They greet everybody because it’s good for business. They understand the person they say “hello” to this morning may be a client this afternoon! So, **if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?** How is your love different and distinct from that of the pagan businessmen in town? Answer...it isn’t. It’s no different.

These questions made the Pharisees crazy. They hated tax collectors, pagans and anyone who was different and outside their tight circle. Yet their love was no more godly than the love of the bottom feeders they hated. These words should disturb us all. We don’t love indiscriminately the way our Father loves. It’s no wonder the world doubts we’re anything more than people addicted to church. Remember, the correction that began in **v.21** relates directly to fact that we are **salt** and **light**. God has called us to a life that has maximum impact in a fallen world.

So the deeper question exposed by our response to these commands is first of all...**Do I trust God to protect and vindicate me?** The second question is...**Do I love others the way God does?** I’d say that’s enough to consider on any given Sunday morning, wouldn’t you? These teachings give us plenty to think and pray about. But there’s one last verse and one more question.

**3. Are my aspirations as a Christian high enough? v.48 - Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

The Greek word translated **perfect** is *telios*. *Telios* doesn’t mean sinlessly perfect. (How do you spell relief?) *Telios* means mature, full grown, and complete. It’s the same word translated **mature** in **Eph. 4:11-13 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.** Maturity is Christlikeness. It’s being like the Son of God who is the express image of God the Father. Notice, the passage says Jesus gave pastors and teachers so the body of Christ might be built up **until we...become mature**. Growing up is a process conditioned by two main factors...time plus obedience. There are no shortcuts. If we obey the Lord, growth is accelerated. But growth is slowed down for those who refuse to submit to God’s Spirit and His Word. This explains why believers at Corinth were still spiritual infants. Sufficient time had elapsed since they first believed, but they resisted God’s truth. Their growth was stunted and in some cases, halted.

So as we finish, think with me about this third question. **Are my aspirations high enough?** Are we content to be church folk and “nice” people? We don’t murder or commit adultery...unless you count anger and lustful thoughts. We don’t believe in divorce though it sometimes happens in our ranks. We seldom break a contract or go back on our promises. But to be honest, we’re not very good at surrendering our rights / turning the other cheek / and giving away our stuff. But doesn’t everybody struggle in this department? But in theory and in song, we love everybody just as God does. We’re nice people!

Yet only God and the watching world can decide whether our impact rises to the level of **salt** and **light**. Only eternity can decide whether our lives glorified God or if they barely made a ripple. You see, the teachings of Jesus are radical! We need to settle that in our minds.

They require a 180 degree turn, not just a slight course adjustment. It's possible for believers to be no different from the crowd who first heard the Sermon on the Mount. They had altered / watered down / redefined / and misinterpreted God's commands. And still today, the Lord Jesus comes among us and says by His Spirit and His Word, "**You have heard that it was said...But I say to you.**"