

The Faithfulness of Loving Our Enemies

Good to see everybody. If you've got your bibles, go ahead and take them out. And if you've been around more than a couple weeks, you **know exactly where to turn**, and that's *Matthew 5*. If you're new, the reason everyone knows that's where we're headed is because we have spent better part of the past two months in this one chapter of the bible. Chapter 5 marks the beginning of something called "the sermon on the mount"—one of the most famous teachings from Jesus of all time.

And today, we have our **work cut out** for us. Because in my experience, there may not be a teaching from Jesus that is more blatantly ignored by more Christians than the one we'll cover today. And a large portion of this teaching is simply about **how we treat other people**. In **today's passage**, Jesus is going to address **how we treat those who are opposed to us, and seem opposed to us**. To use his language from later in the passage, how we treat our "enemies."

And whether we would use that word *enemy* or not, a lot of us *do* probably have people that fit in that *category*—we're going to get to that as we go along. **But first, we need to realize that you and I are often disciplined to see people in that way.** We are often *taught* to see others in terms of those who are *for* us and those who are *against* us. We encounter it at a **personal** level, when we ascribe to life philosophies like "don't let the *haters* get you down" and "you need to *eliminate negative people* from your life." We hear it at a **political** level, when we start talking about how *our* political party is the good guys and the other party is the bad guys. We even sometimes view it like this at a **global** level when we believe that America is the greatest country on earth, and all other countries are either jealous of us or want to destroy us. **All of those are just different ways of viewing other people through antagonistic lenses; which is, in essence, to see them as "enemies."**

And **Christians aren't exceptions** to this *us vs. them* mindset—far from it. In *some* cases, Christians are actually the most guilty of it. **As we speak, a popular Christian recording artist is touring major U.S. cities. In each city, he sets up a massive public worship concert, neglects to file for a permit to do so, gathers hundreds of people in defiance of local COVID-19 safety protocols, and then rants on Twitter about how local governments are "persecuting" him because they fine him for doing all that. He is in essence, seeking out and manufacturing an antagonistic approach towards local governments.**

Whether it's *that*, or viewing life through the lens of the "culture wars"—whatever the particular view is, sometimes Christians are on the front lines of this *antagonistic approach* to other people. And **the irony is that a lot of the time, the people we antagonize for being opposed to us, aren't actually opposed to us at all.** But even if they were, our responses to them still reveal that we haven't fully internalized the things Jesus lays out in this passage.

Because in what we're about to read, Jesus is going to encourage an **altogether different approach** to those who seem opposed to us, whether they really are or not. And I'll just say from the start, what he lays out is not only *beautiful*—it not only is a strategy that has *stood the test of time* throughout human history—but **it is also precisely what our world urgently needs at this very moment.** So let's see what Jesus has to say. You can start following along with me in v. 38:

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

So Jesus kicks things off in the same way he has for the past several weeks: he **quotes a command** or principle from the Old Testament. This time, it's "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (that's Exodus 21:24). Now as barbaric as that might sound to some of us, this is actually a very helpful principle that lies at the heart of our justice system to this day. It's often called the *lex talionis*, which means loosely, "the punishment should fit the crime." That's the idea. And this is a very important idea, both back then *and* today.

Because **human nature**, when you are wronged, usually isn't just to get even with the other person, right? It's to **get ahead**. If you *shove me*, I *punch you*. If you *mildly frustrate me one time*, I go and *gossip about you on repeat*. If you *subtweet me online*, I *clap back and tag five of my followers to pile on too*. The human tendency is towards *escalation* in conflict. But **this idea, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," is meant to curb that tendency in us. It was meant to ensure that justice was proportionate and not excessive.** But Jesus is about to go a step *further* than that, v. 39:

[39] But I say to you, **Do not resist the one who is evil.**

Now just for clarification: that **language, "do not resist an evil person,"** is not actually the best translation of what Jesus says. Because that makes it sound like we're not supposed to do *anything* about evil and injustice when it happens. And I don't think *that's* what Jesus means at all. The word *resist* that he uses was actually the language of a

military counterstrike against an *opponent*. So more *accurately*, what Jesus was saying was “do not *use violence* to resist an evil person” or “do not *retaliate against* an evil person.”

Instead, Jesus gives us **four examples** for how we might respond in those types of scenarios. Let’s pick it up back in the second half of v. 39:

But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. [40] And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. [41] And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. [42] Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Now first, let me say that it’s really **easy to misinterpret Jesus’** instructions here. So if the two options in conflict are “fight” (take revenge) or “flight” (roll over, play dead, cower in fear), people usually *assume* what *Jesus* is advocating for is *flight*. But if you read the passage closely, you’ll see that that’s not actually what Jesus says. He doesn’t just say, “if someone slaps you, *let* them.” He doesn’t say “if someone takes your shirt, give them your *shirt*.” What he actually says is to offer *more* than they desired to take. Offer *more* than what they demanded from you. So **what Jesus proposes is not *fight back*, and not *disengage and walk away*—but rather a third, creative approach to being wronged.**

Now, we need to understand that with each of these examples, Jesus imagines a scenario where **a superior is behaving in a demeaning and belittling way towards you.** That’s the situation. Someone in a *superior social position* uses their *power* to mistreat you in some way. And *in* each example, Jesus is going to propose that you *not* fight back and take revenge, and also that you not cower in fear and walk away, but that you do something completely surprising and creative in response. We don’t have time to go into all *four* of them, but I’ll do the first one to illustrate the point.

Let’s talk about the *slap* that Jesus mentions. Jesus says **“imagine someone slaps you on the right cheek.”** So think about the **mechanics** of this: slapping someone on the *right cheek*, assuming that most people are *right-handed*, would require a backhanded slap. That’s a very dismissive, *shaming* type of violence. So Jesus says in that scenario, you don’t hit them *back*. But you also don’t cower in fear and limp away. Instead, you “turn” (and more literally, that word means “turn and *face*”) him, and offer him your *other* cheek. Now, it’s entirely possible that he might respond by hitting you again. That’s a real possibility. But *if* they wants to hit you *again*, because you have “turned the other cheek,”

they now will have to strike you with their forehand rather than their backhand. **They will now have to strike you not as an inferior, but as an equal.** Does that make sense?

And the **other three examples** Jesus gives have a **similar** effect. In each of them, you're not *retaliating*, but you're also not responding *passively*. **You are reclaiming your dignity and worth in the eyes of the other person, but you're doing it in a creative, non-violent, sort of way.** Psychologists will say that one of the most significant things that oppression and mistreatment attempts to *take away* is the *free will and choice* of the person being oppressed. That's what it does. But by *choosing* by your own will to do *more* than they could ask you to do, you are reclaiming your *will* and your *choice*. And **in a very subversive way, you are communicating to the person who wrongs you that your worth, your value, and the image of God in you is not something they can take away.** No matter *how* they choose to treat you. Because *your* dignity and worth go deeper than a slap, deeper than a cloak *or* a tunic, deeper than an inconvenience, and deeper than your wallet. Does that all make sense?

Now, quickly, **before I move on** here, I do need to make one very *important* clarification. I don't think that Jesus would give these same instructions to a person who is being physically or sexually *abused*. Jesus *could have* used that as an illustration here (that happened back then just like it does today), but he didn't. I think that's significant. *Abuse*, in my opinion, falls in an entirely different category. If you're in *that* type of scenario, here's what we'd tell you to do: come and tell us or the cops right away, so that we can help make sure it gets dealt with as quickly and thoroughly as possible. Everybody clear on that? Okay.

But Jesus says **in other social scenarios** where you are being mistreated in unfair, but legally *permissible* ways you respond with a creative, non-violent alternative. Turning the *other* cheek, offering *another* item of clothing, going the *second* mile, and lending and even *giving* to the one who wants to borrow from you. Which means in many cases, you turn it into an opportunity to *serve* and *benefit* the one who is opposed to you.

So there are **a few different terms** that have been used to describe this ethic from Jesus. Sometimes it's called *pacifism*, or sometimes it's called *non-violence* or *non-retaliation*. And while those are fine terms to use, I'm not crazy about any of them, just because they all seem to define what Jesus says *negatively*—by what they *aren't*. **Which is kind of like calling a healthy marriage “non-adultery,” or freedom “non-slavery.” Technically true, but not all that descriptive or helpful.** My preference is just to call it what Jesus calls it *next*, which is ***loving your enemies***.

Pick it back up with me in v. 43:

[43] “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

So Jesus again quotes from the Old Testament...kind of. I say kind of, because the second half of that quote, “hate your enemy,” is not actually a quote from the bible. Some of you were like, “wait—the bible says to *hate your enemy*? It seems like maybe that’s part of the problem here.” So the bible actually doesn’t say that. What the bible does say is “love your *neighbor*.” But over time, people had taken that to mean “if they’re not my neighbor, but rather my *enemy*, that means I can *hate them*.” Sort of like if I told my son Whit not to hit his sister, and he responded with “so you’re telling me I can hit *anyone who’s not my sister*?” And it’s like *no—no* I’m not saying that at all. Also you’re grounded.

So Jesus clarifies that misunderstanding of the Old Testament command with *this*, v. 44:

[44] But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you—**

Jesus says this ethic applies to your *neighbors* all the way down to your *enemies*. So let’s talk about who an *enemy* is. The word Jesus uses for “**enemy**” is extremely *broad* in its meaning. It includes **any and every person we consider to be opposed to us, whether they truly are opposed to us, or not**. It includes *personal* enemies, *social* enemies, *political* enemies, and *geopolitical* enemies. It encompasses everything from the person at work who makes life a little more difficult for you, all the way up to the terrorist trying to kill you, and everything in between. In other words, if your instinct is to go, “does this even mean _____?” the answer is likely *yes*. Yes it does mean even *them*.

We also need to realize—and I think this is especially important for our modern society—that **enemies can be individual people, or groups of people. Singular or plural**. So if you see all *Democrats* as enemies of *freedom*, that counts. If you see all *Republicans* as enemies of *democracy*, that counts. If you have a deep-seated resentment in you towards all black people or white people, rich people or poor people—or *any other class or grouping there is*—that means you see those people as *enemies*. That all counts in what Jesus is talking about here.

So just to make sure we're all following, let me give you what I think are three **tell-tale signs of an enemy** in your life:

- **You have anger fantasies about them.** Everybody know what anger fantasies are? They're when you constantly imagine what you wish you could say to somebody, if it wouldn't make you a horrible person to say those things in real life. That's an anger fantasy. If you're having those about a particular person or group of people, that means they're an enemy to you.
- **You would rejoice if something bad happened to them.** If when something bad happens to a person, you're fond of celebrating by throwing out phrases like "welp, that's karma," or "serves 'em right!" or "what goes around comes around"—those sorts of things—that means you view them, on some level, as an enemy. **To my progressive friends in the room: we need to talk. I'm not trying to point fingers, but some of you heard that Trump got COVID last week, and you threw a little private party in your brain. Am I lying? And listen: I'm not saying he didn't walk right into it. I'm just saying there's a difference between observing that a person's actions have consequences, and celebrating that another human being got a potentially life-threatening disease. Fair? Okay, so if you rejoice when something bad happens to a person or group of people, that means you see them as an enemy.**
- **You can't bring yourself to say anything positive about them.** If there is a person that you can't say any unqualified positive thing about, that too is an enemy. **If there's a group of people that you can't speak well of without immediately following it with "but here's the thing about them..."**, that person is an enemy. If the only things to come out of your mouth about someone are negative, cynical, cutting, or tearing them down, that person or group of people is an enemy.

So that list probably **isn't exhaustive**, but that should at least **help you discern** whether or not there are people in your life that you see as *enemies*. And Jesus says the way that we should treat those people in our life is that we **should "love" them**. If you've been around City Church for very long, you've heard us point out before that "love" in our modern society, and "love" in the bible, are actually two very different ideas. When most of us say we "love" someone, what we generally mean is either "I *enjoy* them," or "I have some sort of *pleasant feelings about* them." And for Jesus to say "have pleasant feelings about your enemy," to most of us, seems like a pretty odd instruction. Because most of us are going to have a hard time doing that.

But **what Jesus means by "love"** is actually altogether different. The love that Jesus speaks of here is a love of the *will*. It means to actively prefer and pursue the well-being of the other person. It's pursuing *their* good regularly and persistently. And Jesus says

followers of Jesus are called to do *that...* for our *enemies*. And again, I'm not even sure if a lot of us *have true* enemies like people in Jesus' day did. But **even if we did—even if there are people who are actively out to get us—this is how we're called to treat them**. Love them, honor them above ourselves, and actively seek after their good.

So let's brainstorm what that might look like—let's do some hypotheticals of our own:

- Let's say you have a **boss or supervisor** that absolutely has it out for you. They criticize you constantly, and it seems like they always pick *you* as the person who has to stay and work late. In that scenario, maybe you agree to work late, and then you show up the next morning with their favorite espresso drink in hand to give them (that *doesn't* have any type of poison in it—that's a very important detail: *no poison drinks*). But maybe that's what you do.
- Let's say you have a **friend** you had a **minor falling out with recently**, and as a result, they are now saying all sorts of things to your mutual friends about you that aren't *true*. In that scenario, maybe you dial them up and offer to babysit their kids so they can have a night out. Or maybe you decide to regularly, *ongoingly*, do that for them.
- Or let's make it **real practical** for a second: let's talk about **in-laws**. I am lucky to have amazing in-laws, but it has come to my attention that some of you may have *less-than-amazing* in-laws. That some of you may even have in-laws that seem to *enjoy* tearing you down or putting you down. Would that be an accurate assessment? Just blink twice if they're sitting next to you. Okay, but if that's the case, what if you made a point, the next time you're with them, to go out of your way to serve them, help them, or do things for them? What if you created a habit of, every time you're with them, saying in front of other people, one thing you really appreciate about them? I'll give you a freebie—even if you can't think of a single thing you admire about them, tell them how thankful you are that they raised a fantastic human being that you now get to be married to.
- And even if doing any of **those things seem impossible** for us, Jesus gives us one more idea right there in our verse: "**pray** for those that persecute you." No matter how *hard* it is for you to love your enemy, no matter how *difficult* it is for you to be around them, one thing we can all do is *pray intentionally* for them.

So again, these are just *ideas*—feel free to **take these and run with them**. And it will probably **take some creativity**, to be sure. Depending on past interactions with them, it might take a *lot* of creativity. You might take a few minutes later today, get out a sheet of paper, and right down anyone you see as your enemy, and then jot down 2-3 creative ways to love and care for them. You might want to call a brainstorming session with your

LifeGroup, let them in on the situation, and get them to help you think through it. But one way or another, creatively love and serve your enemies.

Now, because I know human nature, I know **what many of us feel in response** to a command like this. We hear “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” and part of us is like, *well yeah, but that’s just not an effective way to go about life. If we were to love people like that in our life, they would just keep mistreating us as a result.* Maybe we’re thinking *it sounds nice to say love your enemies, but it just doesn’t work.* So let’s talk about that for a second. Let’s talk about the belief that non-retaliation and loving your enemies doesn’t “work.” So I’m assuming that by saying that, what we mean is that the *alternative* to them—retaliation and getting back at your enemies—*does* work. Or at least that that is *more* effective than what Jesus presents here. So let’s consider whether or not that assessment is accurate.

Imagine this scenario with me. Let’s say there’s **somebody at your job** that just absolutely hates you. For whatever reason, they just want to make your life a living nightmare. So let’s say they start spreading rumors about you at the office that aren’t true, which leads to people in the office starting to “pick sides” between you and the other person. And let’s say that in return, you decide to go and tell the boss that that person has been taking off early every day instead of staying until 5:00. And let’s say that in response to that, the other person tells the boss that *you* have been stealing money from the company, and gets you fired, and then the other person is known as “that person who got that other person fired” and everybody walks on tip-toes around them. Because more often than not, *that’s* what life looks like when revenge and retaliation is our M.O. So can I ask you: does that sound like an *effective* way to go about life? Does that sound like it “works” to you?

Let’s do **another one**—this one on a slightly **bigger scale**. And I get that what I’m about to do is a little risky, but I need us to see this. Here is a brief summary of the past several months in the United States of America. Some police officers respond to those resisting arrest with the excessive use of force, in many cases unnecessarily *killing* men and women of color. *Some* people *respond* to that excessive use of force with violent retaliatory protests, arson, and rioting. In response to that *rioting*, our president sends in marked and *unmarked* officers to “quell” the violence by shooting rubber bullets and tear gas at people (even those who are protesting peacefully). In response to *that*, *some* of the protests grow *more* violent. And responding to *that*, at least one 17 year old responds by crossing state lines with an assault rifle, *anticipating* that there will be a

prime opportunity to use it on protestors, and does: he kills two people. In response to events like *that*, people continue to threaten, harm, and even *kill* some police officers.

So **with all that laid out**, let me ask you the same question: is *retaliation* “working” in our *country*? Is *revenge* “effective”? Because I’m watching all of this go down, and it sure doesn’t seem like it is. And I get that you could respond by saying “well it’s better than it would be if nobody did *anything* about it!” And maybe you’re right—I don’t know, because we hardly ever approach it that way to find out. But **all I’m saying is that if we’re going to cast doubt upon the teachings of Jesus because they’re not “effective,” let’s at least have the humility to admit that our alternatives aren’t all that effective either.**

And far **more importantly than what works** or doesn’t work, this needs to be said: **we don’t obey Jesus primarily because it’s *effective*; we obey Jesus because it’s *faithful*. So even if loving your enemy was the least practically *effective* thing in the *world*, being a follower of Jesus means you care more about *faithfulness* than *effectiveness*. If you only obey Jesus when it makes logical sense to you, you’re not actually following Jesus—you’re following your own reason.** Following Jesus means you care about faithfulness to what the Scriptures teach, and faithfulness to *who God is*.

Which brings us to **what Jesus says next**. Because next, he lays out what our *motivation* should be for living in this way towards our enemies. **Why, at the end of the day, should we choose love over revenge?** Here’s why—look with me at v. 45:

(love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...) [45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

The reason we choose to love our enemies is **because that is precisely who God is, and that is precisely what he does**. To illustrate this, Jesus references **the weather**. “God,” he says, “causes the sun to rise on the evil *and* the good, and sends rain on the just *and* the unjust.” So you and I probably think of sun as *good*, and rain as *bad*. But remember that Jesus was speaking to a largely *agrarian* society: the sun and the rain were the two key ingredients to making crops grow—to *survival*. And more significantly, they were the two ingredients that you as a *farmer* had zero control over. So his point is that God the Father generously provides for *all sorts of people*—even those who outright

oppose *him* and his purposes in the world. So **God himself loves his enemies. God himself seeks after the good of those who oppose him.**

And as most of us know, there is **no clearer example** of this than what happened at **the cross**. Romans 5:10 says that while we were *enemies* of God, he *reconciled* us to him by the death of his son Jesus. God's first response to *his* enemies wasn't to smite them, or take revenge on them, or nuke them off the face of the planet—but rather to send his own son to die in their place. And that son Jesus—as he breathed his very last breaths on the cross—would cry out to those who *put him* there: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus loved his enemies, sought the *good* of *his enemies*, until the very end. **That is what the posture of the God looks like towards those that oppose him. At the very heart of the gospel message is a God who put on flesh and died for the good of his enemies.**

And it was that act itself that **gave us the ability** to live in the same way. By the Spirit of Jesus living within *us*, we can take the same posture towards *our enemies*, whoever they might be. **When we choose to take up the mantle** of *loving* our enemies, Jesus says we become children—*imitators*—of God himself. We become a *living, breathing picture* of who God is to a world that desperately needs that picture. We become a refreshing, distinctive presence for a world gone mad with hatred towards their enemies. And that has always been the goal for us as followers of Jesus: to become a refreshing, distinctive, counter-cultural presence in the world.

Which is precisely **where Jesus lands** in this passage—v 46:

[46] For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? [47] And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [48] You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus says “*listen—anybody* can love the people that love *them*.” **That takes almost no effort** at all. If someone does good things for you, it's easy to do good things for them. If someone treats you well, it's easy to treat *them* well in return. **What takes effort is loving the people who *don't* love you.** Treating the people *well* who treat *you terribly*. But—and this matters—that is the ethic that faith in Jesus generates in us. And it looks like nothing the world has ever seen.

What our society has gotten so very good at doing over the past handful of years is turning *friends* into *enemies*. You see this everywhere from employee vs. employer to white vs. black to Red state vs. Blue state, to Americans vs. foreigners...and who knows what else. This is a *common* practice: we take a coworker, a classmate, a neighbor, an acquaintance, that we are in regular proximity to...and once we find out that they are a little bit difficult, a little bit different, a little bit frustrating—we write them off and decide they're on the other team. **Sin leads us to turn *friends* into *enemies*.**

What Jesus is suggesting here is that we turn *enemies* into *friends*. By choosing to love those who oppose us and serve those who are against us, we build bridges where there weren't *were'n't* any. And *if you* decided to love your enemies persistently, no matter how they treated you, do you not think some of them might choose to change *their* posture towards you? If you started treating other people well consistently, do you not think it might have an effect on their attitude towards *others* too? I think it just might. But again, even if it doesn't, it's still the faithful thing to do, because it's *what God did*.

So there's **no doubt** about it: **living this way will be** counter-intuitive, it will be challenging, and it will be difficult. There will be times where you want to bail on it and just take out every bit of frustration and anger you have directly on those people. But in those moments, here's what I would offer to you. Remember: *you have the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus living in you. You have the servant-hearted, enemy-loving blood of Jesus coursing through your veins.* Hebrews 12:3 says it this way:

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

To be sure, loving your enemies is an **impossible ethic to live out on your own**. No doubt about it. But you aren't on your own. You have the Spirit of Jesus within you.

Let's pray together.