



THE DIVINE LAW OF LOVE

MATTHEW 5:38-48

Today we look at some of the most misunderstood Scripture in the entire Bible. There probably is no other part of the Sermon on the Mount that has been so misinterpreted and misapplied. It has been interpreted to mean that Christians are to be sanctimonious doormats. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It has been used to promote pacifism, conscientious objection to military service, lawlessness, anarchy and many other things that it simply doesn't apply to.

So what's going on here? For one thing Jesus is responding to current teaching and practice ("You have heard...") For another, He knows us—our basic nature is selfish. We insist on getting our own way, of getting what we think is our own, and protecting our rights. So He tells us...

Matthew 5:38 - 42 (NIV) 38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

The oldest law in the world—an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth—is known as the Lex Talionis. It appears in the earliest known code of laws—the Code of Hammurabi, who reigned in Babylon from 2285 to 2242 B.C.

We could call it the law of tit-for-tat. It was a good because it limited punishment only to the one committing the crime; because a judge or court was the arbitrator; ...

...because it restrained revenge by limiting the compensation of a victim to an exact equivalent and no more; and because it prohibited the taking of the law into one's own hands.

When Jesus begins with, "You have heard that it was said..." He's talking about how the religious leaders misused the intent of the law. They took it out of the law courts and extended it to personal relationships.

In other words they used it in exactly the way it wasn't intended—for personal revenge—eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Now Jesus comes along and tells us to turn the other cheek. He's telling us to be forgiving.

Sir Walter Scott had difficulty with the idea of “turning the other cheek.” But Jesus' words took on special meaning one day when Scott threw a rock at a stray dog to chase it away. His aim was straighter and his delivery stronger than he had intended, for he hit the animal and broke its leg. Instead of running off, the dog limped over to him and licked his hand. Sir Walter never forgot that touching response. He said, “That dog preached the Sermon on the Mount to me as few ministers have ever presented it.” Scott said he had not found human beings so ready to forgive their enemies.

1. Jesus is Concerned With What We Are:

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' primary concern is with what we are, rather than what we do. What we do is important—important because it shows what we are inside.

Yet, it's a struggle for many of us. We Christians insist on our rights and complain about the unfairness of life. This may be a byproduct of life in the United States. After all, the Declaration of Independence states that we have certain inalienable rights...

...the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But today we claim civil rights, women's rights, children's rights, worker's rights, gay rights, prisoners' rights, and even Christian rights.

How different this is to what the great British preacher, George Mueller, wrote, “There was a day when I died, utterly died, died to George Muller and his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame of even my brethren and friends; and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”

2. Christians Go Far Beyond the Laws of the World:

Jesus is showing us that Christians go far beyond the law of tit-for-tat. We don't think of our rights, but of our duties. One of the places we get hung up is thinking that if someone does us wrong, that the Christian thing is to allow them just to walk all over us.

Jesus is not talking about allowing ourselves to get beat up by bullies. He is not giving permission for thugs, tyrants and evil-doers.

He is not justifying moral compromise, political anarchy, or pacifism. He's not talking about supporting professional beggars. We're not to roll over and play dead in the face of evil—in fact, it

is our Christian duty to actively oppose evil.

Jesus is most concerned that our attitude and conduct toward evildoers and enemies will be guided by love and mercy, rather than by retaliation and holding grudges.

When revenge, hatred, and unforgiveness rule our lives, we are actually destroying ourselves. Bitterness and anger can cause headaches, backaches, allergic disorders, ulcers, high blood pressure, and heart attacks, to name just a few. It is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

During World War II the U.S. submarine Tang surfaced under the cover of darkness to fire upon a large Japanese convoy off the coast of China. Since previous raids had left the American vessel with only eight torpedoes, the accuracy of every shot was absolutely essential. The first seven missiles were right on target; but when the eighth was launched, it suddenly deviated and headed right back at their own ship. The emergency alarm rang out, but it was too late. Within a matter of seconds, the U.S. sub received a direct hit and sank almost instantly.

In the same way we torpedo ourselves when we don't respond in Christian love. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Because it is unnatural, we have to practice forgiveness, like any other discipline. Forgiveness is not just an occasional act: it is a permanent attitude."

Jesus is telling us to stop being so easily offended. Sincerely desire to help others. Look for ways to help. Always respond in love, as our Savior did. Be ready to forgive. This is who we Christians are. In this way we...

3. Christians turn the world's standards upside down.

Matthew 5:43 - 47 (NIV) 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 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. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

Jesus is, of course, talking about the divine law of love—a love of the will. We are to love our enemies no matter what they've done. In fact the real test of love is in how we relate not to fellow Christians, but to those who oppose us.

After hearing her pastor's sermon on loving our enemies, little Amy wrote him this note: Dear Preacher, I heard you say to love our enemies. I am only six and do not have any yet. I hope to have some when I am seven. Love, Amy

This teaching by Jesus is totally counter-culture to the way the world reacts. You are supposed to hate enemies, not love them. The only way you can love an enemy is by the strength of Christ—you must be a believer.

4. God's Standards are not for unbelievers:

These teachings are not for non-Christians. Jesus is speaking to you and me—speaking to His followers. The only way anyone could live up to what Jesus is teaching here is with the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we lose ourselves to Christ, we can turn the other cheek, go the second mile, give our coat, and help others in desperate need, But Jesus isn't done—now He tells us to love people we don't want to love.

In fact, as Christians that's part of our job description. Our job is to love people we don't have to love or even want to love. We are to love even those people who do bad things to us. We are to love our enemies. We are to treat them like a neighbor.

This turns everything upside down. It is not simply that we are not to strike back at them—we are to love them as God does, and have a positive attitude toward them.

Thomas Merten wrote in *Seeds of Contemplation*, “Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you were capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy.

“Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God's love and God's kindness and God's patience and mercy and understanding of the weakness of men.

“Do not be too quick to condemn the man who no longer believes in God. For it is perhaps your own coldness and avarice and mediocrity and materialism and sensuality and selfishness that have killed his faith.”

When you and I face problems and difficulties and obnoxious people and the many things that irritate us—we are to behave like God behaves. We are to be like Him and treat others as He treats them.

5. Our treatment of others doesn't depend upon who they are or what they do.

Remember, your standing with God does not depend on who you are or what you've done. It depends on who He is and what Christ has done. We are saved, in His family only because of His grace.

If you are really honest, you realize how much your life is governed by other people—by what they do to us and think about us. We let people control us.

Jesus says don't act like that. Act like God. Because of God's love and presence you are no longer governed by what people say. You see them in a different way—the way God sees them.

We are to love even those we dislike. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Because of our old human nature this is very, very hard.

Leo Tolstoy said, "Repay evil with good and you deprive the evildoer of all the pleasure of his wickedness."

Jesus' words here are the most powerful teaching in Scripture on the meaning of love. It's easy to love family and friends. We may have some kind of love for those who are kind of like us. But Jesus is talking about another kind of love.

He's talking about the love that breaks down the walls of pride, prejudice, judgmental people, spite, hatefulness, vengefulness, and so on. When our culture says it's okay to hate your enemies,

Jesus says, "Love them. Seek to do them the highest good." I may not like a dirty, vicious beggar and cannot make him my friend. I cannot like the criminal who may have robbed me and threatened my life. I cannot like a liar and a cheat—or someone who has slandered me again and again.

But I can, by the grace and strength of Jesus Christ, love them all, try to see what's wrong with them, work for their good, and, most of all, because of this proactive kind of love, maybe free them from their wrongful ways—maybe even see them saved.

Application:

Jesus concludes this section by telling us to, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48).

We know we cannot be perfect this side of heaven. But we can begin letting the love of Jesus flow through us. It all has to do with love—stop thinking about ourselves and start thinking about others. The one thing that makes us like God is a love that never stops caring for others, no matter who they are, no matter what they do. It is when we reproduce in our life the sacrificial love of God that we become most like God, and therefore become “perfect” in the New Testament sense of the word.