

# Matthew 5:38-48: Love Your Enemies

[Paul Blackham, 21/01/2018, St. Crispin's Bitesize Matthew #9]

Readings: Leviticus 19:9-18 & Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Matthew 5:38-48

Do not resist an evil person – Love your enemies

The challenging teaching that Jesus hit us with in Matthew 5:21-26 is now taken further. We felt the profound challenge when Jesus told us that in His kingdom, we do not insult anybody, and we do not even think hostility towards them. Rather, we must work to bring peace in our relationships.

Now Jesus builds on that foundation to take us deeper into His kingdom. If we are not to think nay bad towards those we don't like, now He tells us that we may never show respond with violence **even when a person is violent towards us**.

There is no piece of Jesus' teaching that has attracted so much rejection and criticism as **this** teaching.

If somebody hits the follower of the kingdom, then they must not respond with violence... in fact they must simply allow the violent person to strike them yet again!

Naturally, this teaching will not be possible unless we have taken the earlier teaching to heart. If we are still calling people 'fools' and 'idiots,' then we will certainly not be able to cope with this rejection of revenge and retaliation.

Let's just note carefully what Jesus is commanding in these verses. Notice Jesus' starting point in verse 39 – "Do not resist an evil person". These words are so strange, so against the grain, so seemingly impossible that we surely have to keep checking to see if we are reading them correctly.

"Do not resist an evil person".

Surely we **must** resist an evil person. If we **don't** resist the evil person then they will just get away with doing evil! Surely Jesus must have... misspoken at this point!

But, no, when we check His words, they are still there – "Do not resist an evil person".

Furthermore, Jesus Himself put this into practice. When people showed violence against Him, He never, ever retaliated with violence. He did this even though it cost Him His own life.

No... but wait... surely it is one thing to reject violence when it is your own life at stake... but when other people's lives are at stake... especially the lives of innocent victims... especially when those innocent victims are people who we dearly love... surely **then** Jesus' teaching

cannot apply! Surely, when the lives of precious innocents are at stake... then we **must** resist evil people.

Yet, this very scenario was dealt with in the biographies of Jesus.

When evil men came to arrest Him, Peter drew a sword in order to defend Jesus against the violence of very evil people. Peter knew that these were evil people who intended torture, violence and murder against a totally innocent victim... so he reacted in the natural way that any ordinary human being would do... He pulled out his sword and began to fight to protect the innocent from evil men.

Jesus reacted very, very strongly to this. He commanded Peter to put his weapon away. He actually healed the person that Peter had injured and explained that the people who live by violence will die by violence... those that trust in violence will meet a violent end.

When we get into this teaching of Jesus, so many people put this objection... and all kinds of other objections... against Jesus... and yet it is clear that He and His followers really did teach this and they also lived by it.

So, once again we go back to the starting point of Jesus – “Do not resist an evil person”. Yes, He really did say it... and He really did put it into practice.

Furthermore, we find this revolutionary teaching of Jesus repeated and explained over and over again in the writings of the apostles of Jesus, the key leaders of His global community.

For example, in Peter’s first letter he wrote [1 Peter 3:9] – “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” Jesus called the people of His kingdom to never resist an evil person, and if we want the blessing of Jesus, if we want His face turned towards us, then we must obey this profound teaching.

Peter clearly remembered how badly he behaved when Jesus was arrested... and he never forgot how Jesus Himself behaved under such violent provocation. In 1 Peter 2:23 he writes that “when they hurled their insults at Jesus, He did not retaliate; when He suffered He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.”

Jesus entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.

This is of very, very great importance. **THIS** is the key to everything here.

This is the wisdom that the ancient Hebrew Scriptures taught.

For example, Proverbs 20:22 – “Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!” Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.”

The apostle Paul refers to Jesus’ teaching that do not resist an evil person and expands it a little more, including this truth about vengeance belonging only to the LORD God – Romans 12:17-21:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but **overcome evil with good.**”

Ok, so this teaching of Jesus is not an incidental feature of His kingdom. It was taught and practiced by His followers in the New Testament. Although His followers suffered violence at the hands of evil men over and over again... although they were killed by these violent, evil men... yet, in the whole New Testament the only example of any follower of Jesus resorting to violence is Peter when Jesus was arrested... and Jesus rebuked Peter for doing it.

Furthermore, when we go back to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5, we see just how far Jesus intended us to take this. What if evil people were stealing our stuff? What if they were using violence to force us to work for them? What if they were exploiting us in all kinds of ways? Surely there comes a point when we have to respond with violence!

Matthew 5:39-42 – “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.”

Yes, Jesus really means this. It is far better to suffer violence or lose your coat/wallet/money/possessions or time/energy... even life... rather than resort to violence. Violence is never an option for the follower of Jesus.

But... wait... what about those Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus quoted? What about the eye for eye and tooth for tooth verse that Jesus quoted? Surely in the Old Testament there was lots and lots of violence!

Well, the phrase that Jesus quotes is stated three times in the Law of Moses: Exodus 21:22-27, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. Each of these occasions deals with the issue of crime and punishment in slightly different contexts.

Exodus 21:22-27 is dealing with punishments being proportionate to the crime. If the police arrest someone for stealing an apple, it is not a proportionate punishment to chop off their hand or even imprison them for life or execute them [as was done in British history]. Exodus 21 explains that justice must make sure that the crime and the punishment are in balance – eye for eye, tooth for tooth etc.

These laws are dealing with the system of crime and punishment that the ancient state of Israel was to live by – and the LORD wanted to make sure they stayed away from that ‘disproportionate response’ thinking that was common in the Roman and British empire i.e. if a hurt was done to one a citizen then 20 times as many people from the ‘offending nation’ would be killed.

What is fascinating is that the very next verses deal with an example of a servant whose eye is destroyed by their master. What good would it do for the servant if the master’s eye were

simply destroyed in return? So, the LORD God gives **this** law – [Exodus 21:26-27] “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.”

Leviticus 24:20 is a similar passage, but it has the added dimension of ensuring that crime and punishment is the same for native citizens and foreign guests as well. Everybody must receive the same justice, regardless of their national background.

Deuteronomy 19:21 has another dimension to it. This Scripture is dealing with the case of someone who falsely accuses someone of a serious crime. If a person does this, then whatever punishment they were trying to falsely bring on their victim... **that** should be the punishment given to the person who made the false accusation. In a way, this Scripture is saying that the law courts should bring a bit of poetic justice to a person who brings false testimony to court.

Now, clearly, the problem was that people had taken these principles of crime and punishment for the law courts and brought them into their own private lives.

We got a flavour of it in Proverbs 20:22 – “Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!” Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.”

People had obviously thought “eye for eye, tooth for tooth”... yes, that’s the way to live.

If anybody hurts **me**, then I will make sure **they** get repaid in full.

If somebody hurts **me**, then I will hurt **them!**

If somebody steals from **me**, then I will steal from **them!**

If there is going to be any justice, then it is up to **me** to get it.

This is the basic issue in all this:

If there is going to be any justice, then it is up to **me** to get it.

What do we mean by ‘justice’?

This is one of the deepest and strangest things in the whole Bible. The pagan nations of the ancient world had a view of justice that said – Justice is when wicked people are punished for doing wrong.

This ancient view of justice is actually a view of ‘justice’ that we can still see in aspects of our modern ‘justice’ systems. Over the law courts in London there is a statue of a woman holding a sword in one hand and a pair of scales in the other. She is blindfolded. She is *Iustitia*, the Roman goddess of Justice.

The idea is that she is blind to the circumstances of the people who come before her and she then, dispassionately weighs what they have done and then administers ‘justice’ with her sword.

This pagan idea of justice is what so many people carry with them into their basic dealings of life. They believe that violence must be met with violence.... That the best way of dealing with evil and evil people is to use violence.

The Bible has a very, very different understanding of Justice.

When you read all the occurrences of Justice and righteousness in the Bible, you will find a very, very strange pattern. In the Bible, justice is dealing with wrong; responding to the consequences of evil; you could even say, justice is righting wrongs.

However, only the final part of justice has anything to do with punishing those who do wrong... and that part belongs only to the Living God [and possibly the state].

In the Bible justice has three parts:

1. **Justice begins with compassion.** Justice brings help and practical love to people in need. If wrong has been done, then the first concern of justice is compassion for those who are in need. Justice cares for the poor, the widows, the orphans, the oppressed.

There are so many of these references that we can't even begin to get into them all, but I've selected just two.

Isaiah 1:17 – “Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

Zechariah 7:9 – “This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'”

2. **Justice looks to bring restoration and forgiveness to the people who have done the wrong.**

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the justice of the Living God is that the reason He forgives sinners, the reason that He is gracious to us when we do wrong, is because He is full of justice.

If we have the pagan view of justice we might think that justice is the opposite of forgiveness and love... yet throughout the Scriptures the love and forgiveness of the LORD God come from the fact that He is full of justice.

So, in Isaiah 30 when the prophet wants to explain that the people should repent and turn away from their evil ways, he says [Isaiah 30:18] “The LORD longs to be gracious to you; He rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice.”

Psalms 33:5 – “The LORD loves justice: the earth is full of His unfailing love.”

The LORD is full of justice so...

1. He cares for those who have been harmed by evil.
2. He longs to be gracious towards those who do evil.

### 3. Justice will finally punish the wicked if they never turn from their evil.

In the Bible we are constantly told that there is a final day of Justice when not only will relief and restoration come to all those who are suffering all kinds of evil in this present age... but also there will be a total and complete punishment given to all the wicked by the LORD God Himself.

A day is coming, foretold throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament, when the LORD will judge those who refuse to turn from their evil ways.

Even now the LORD allows national governments to bring a measure of this punishment against evil-doers [criminals]... as a kind of advance sample of the cosmic judgement to come. We saw something of that side of justice in the 'eye for eye' laws.

In Isaiah 11:4 we get the different aspects of justice all wrapped up together as Isaiah looks ahead to the day when Jesus the Messiah will come to judge the whole universe.

"...with righteousness he will **judge** the needy, with **justice** he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked."

Yes, the LORD's justice cares for the needy and He longs to bring repentance and forgiveness to those who do evil... but there will finally be a day when He will bring vengeance against the wicked.

In Matthew 5, Jesus deals with the fact that we tend to set ourselves up in that third kind of justice... the idea of vengeance and violence. We think that the only way to deal with violent and exploitative people is for us to resort to violent vengeance... and we need to bring this judgement of vengeance against our enemies **right now**.

Jesus tells us not to do this. We need to leave this mindset completely.

We **should** care for justice. It is something that we are commanded to do throughout all the Scriptures... yet all the commands for justice concern the first two aspects of justice: caring for the needy and compassion for the wicked. The third aspect of justice is for the LORD God alone.

Let's listen again to Paul's explanation of Jesus' teaching from Romans 12:17-21

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but **overcome evil with good.**"

So, how do we show love to people who are violent to us?

We might imagine all kinds of extreme scenarios and wonder how this Way of Jesus would work in those cases.

THAT is not the place to start.

I've met the followers of Jesus who have followed Jesus even when faced with some of the most extreme scenarios you could imagine... and the incredible love and wisdom that some of them have shown is clearly from the LORD Jesus Himself.

How can we have the wisdom to act like that?

We start with the much simpler situations we face day-by-day. How do we respond to the people who insult us and exploit us and steal from us in much less extreme situations? How do we show them love? How do we bring the LORD's justice to them?

Many times people think as if there were only two options – we either respond with violence or we do nothing. People have often said to me, “if you were faced with evil people who threatened you and your family... you would do nothing?”

Isn't it interesting how powerful the myth of violence is? When people speak like that, they reveal that as far as they are concerned any action that is not violent is no action at all.

In the real world, there are many, many possible actions – it is just that none of the possible actions involve violence. Once we learn from Jesus how to consider other actions... actions that might bring about results beyond anything we might have imagined... then we see that violence is the easy and cheap option that cannot bring about the Justice of the Living God.

You probably know that Gandhi was deeply affected by the teaching of Jesus. He was trying to see a way to overcome the British empire. He actually read Tolstoy's book about Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, and this introduced Gandhi to Jesus' way to deal with violence. It made a huge impact on Gandhi. He was very clear that Jesus' teaching about refusing to resist the evil person is far from a call to do nothing.

Gandhi – “My non-resistance is active resistance in a different plane. Non-resistance to evil does not mean absence of any resistance whatsoever but it means not resisting evil with evil but with good. Resistance, therefore, is transferred to a higher and absolutely effective plane.”

We can never resist evil with evil... with violence. We can only resist evil with good... with love and generosity and real courage and self-sacrifice.

In other words... we must live just as Jesus lived.

AMEN.