



“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”
(Matthew 5:48).

The Father’s Way

Lesson Subject: The Christian must live in love and leave vengeance to God.

L96. Date: October 1983. **Text:** Matthew 5:38-48.

Topic: Jesus: Teachings of.

We are studying the central section of the Sermon on the Mount. Few passages in the New Testament reveal more clearly than this one the true essence of the Christian faith in personal relationship with others. And yet, this is a misunderstood passage. We will review it looking for its teachings concerning Christian attitudes and actions.

The lesson text deals with the section of the Sermon in which Jesus is “fulfilling the law.” He is giving the full meaning and application of the law of God which men had but dimly and partially understood before. He is showing that law is designed not only to control one's body, but also to determine the direction of the human spirit. The full meaning of the law relating to vengeance and benevolent love is set forth in this lesson.

Jesus speaks in practical terms of personal retaliation for wrongs done, of doing in a cheerful spirit more than is required, of loving one's neighbor as oneself in practical terms of helpfulness, and of being revealed as a child of God by the quality of one's life. Here is a study which deals with issues that the Christian faces in life today. Faithful study of this lesson will be personally rewarding and spiritually enlightening. Study it with the central truth in mind: “The Christian must live in love and leave vengeance to God.”

I. SACRIFICES OR RETALIATION (Matthew 5:38~42)

A. Limited liability — “*An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*” (verse 38). *Lex Talionis*, men call it. It is probably the oldest law known to man. The earliest copy known of it is in the Code of Hammurabi, who reigned in Babylon 2285-2242 B.C. — more than two centuries before Abraham. It says that if a man afflicts an injury upon another, an equivalent injury shall be inflicted upon him. That law is stated in Exodus 21:23-25: “*If any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*” The same principle is stated in Leviticus 24:19, 20 and Deuteronomy 19:21.

Men commonly refer to such laws as savage and merciless. Not so. The principle is permeated with mercy. Its aim is to limit the liability of the person who has injured another.

In ancient times, the crime of one man brought punishment on his entire family or tribe. Achan sinned against Israel in taking a spoil from Jericho (Joshua 7). They brought “*his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had. . . . and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones*” (Joshua 7:24,25). That was the custom of ancient times. The innocent relative died with the guilty person.

This law definitely limits vengeance. Only the guilty one can be punished. His punishment must be in proportion to the crime committed. If a man knocked out another man's tooth, he could not have his head cut off for it. The punishment could be no more severe than the wrong done.

B. Personal revenge (verses 39-42). “*Resist not evil.*” That principle has been applied by pacifists to law enforcement, national defense, and other forms of resistance to evil. That is a wrong application. The principle applies to personal vengeance for wrongs done to one.

The “*eye for an eye*” was given to guide the judge in deciding matters equitably in a court of law (Deuteronomy 19:18). Applied to the individual, the law states, “*Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD*” (Leviticus 19:18). The law court was to execute absolute justice; the individual was to show unending mercy.

Jesus raises the principle of the law higher than ever. Our Christian principle is, “*Recompense to no man evil for evil*” (Romans 12:17). “*See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men*” (I Thessalonians 5:15).

“*What glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is*

acceptable with God” (I Peter 2:20). Jesus applies that principle in three areas of life.

(1) Personal insult must not be revenged. *“Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also”* (verse 39). Personal abuse is not under consideration in that statement. For a right-handed man to strike another person on the right cheek, he would have to strike with the back of his hand. In Jewish rabbinic law, to hit a man with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as hitting him with one's fist or slapping him with the flat of the hand. Jesus is not discussing physical abuse, but personal insult. Even if a person makes the most direct and intentional insult, you must not retaliate against him. Jesus set the example for us: *“Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: who his own self bare our sins in his own body”* (I Peter 2:23, 24). The Christian must grow up spiritually to the point that he forgets what it is to be insulted.

(2) Financial loss must be borne. *“If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also”* (verse 40). The “coat” was an inner garment worn in those days. One would have several of these in his wardrobe. But the “cloak” was the blanket-like outer garment which one wore in the day and wrapped himself for warmth at night. The law forbade a man to keep another's cloak overnight (Exodus 22:26, 27). But Jesus taught that the Christian must suffer loss rather than take matters into his own hands and seek personal vengeance.

(3) Time and effort must be invested. *“Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain”* (verse 41). Palestine was a land occupied by foreign (Roman) troops. A soldier could compel a civilian to supply food, lodging, or carry his baggage. The civilian had no recourse but to obey. Many who were inconvenienced by such a conscription to service must have borne it with grumbling. At the end of the mile that they were required to go, they may have thrown the soldier's pack in the dirt. But Jesus said the Christian is to bear responsibilities (even those placed unjustly on him) with good will. He is to do more than is required of him. Even when the demand is unreasonable and discourteous, the Christian will be concerned about the opportunity it gives to show what it means to belong to Jesus; No sacrifice is too great for that privilege.

C. Financial benevolence — *“Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away”* (verse 42). That principle is based on Deuteronomy 15:7-11. It does not teach irresponsibility in finances, or the wicked would take all that a person has. It teaches unselfishness in one's resources. No one is a reservoir to receive and retain

God's bounty. He is to be a stream through which God's provisions flow on to others. God gives to us that we may give to others in His name.

II. LOVE OR HATE (Matthew 5:43-48)

A. Love may not be limited and selective. *“Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy”* (verse 43). That statement is to be found nowhere in the Bible. God said, *“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. . . . The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself”* (Leviticus 19:18, 34). Man says, “Hate your enemy”; while God says, “Love him as yourself.”

How is love to one's enemy manifested? It is manifested in a good attitude: *“Bless them that curse you.”* It is manifested in helpful deeds: *“Do good to them that hate you.”* It is manifested by spiritual concern: *“Pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”* (See verse 45.)

B. Love can be a witness to one's faith. *“That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven”* (verse 45). To “be” is to be manifest as, to be recognized as, children of your Father in heaven.

Remember there are different words for love in the Greek language. *Stergein* is the natural affection of parent for child. *Eros* is the passion between the sexes. *Philia* is warm, tender affection, the feeling of dearness and preciousness. *Agape* is a concern for the welfare of another that causes one to reach out without thought of personal reward. No matter what one does, how he responds, whether he appreciates it or not, ill will against him never enters one's heart. And agape is the kind of love Jesus said Christians must show to their enemies. No wonder that manifests them as *“the children of your Father which is in heaven”* (verse 45). That kind of love identifies God (I John 4:8), is received only from God (Romans 5:5), and manifests the presence of God (I John 3:14; John 13:35).

C. Love follows the example of God. *“He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust”* (verse 45). His love is not given or withheld on the basis of another's response. Neither must the (agape) love of the Christian be based on one's worthiness to be loved.

“If ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?” (verses 46, 47). To be a witness for God, the Christian must be different, do more, and go further than is natural for those in the flesh. God loved us when we were unlovely, unloving, and rebellious sinners who did not want Him to love us. He loved

us so that He gave His only begotten Son to die for us (John 3:16). Why does a Christian think it strange that he be expected to love unlovely people?

Set your heart to extend sincere good will and desire for the best to every person you meet. You will never meet a person God does not love. Because you belong to God, you must never meet a person you do not love.

D. Love is the goal of true maturity. *“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”* (verse 48). That term “perfect” does not mean moral perfection. It is the Greek word *teleios* which means a person or thing fully realizes the purpose of its existence. A man is “perfect” if he realizes the purpose for which he was created and sent into the world. What was the purpose of man's creation? Since he was made in the image and likeness of God, we can say his purpose is to be like God (Genesis 1:26). God has saved us that we might be like Him, *“conformed to the image of his Son”* (Romans 8:29). Blessed is the person in whom God's purpose is fulfilled.

Christian love has been defined as “meeting human needs with grace.” It is the spirit of II Corinthians 12:15, *“I will very gladly spend and be spent for you.”*

QUESTIONS

1. What is the central theme of this lesson?
2. How does verse 38 teach limited liability?
3. How should *“resist not evil”* be applied today?
4. What does verse 39 teach you about pride?
5. How does I Peter 2:23, 24 apply to you today?
6. What is the principle of verses 40, 41?
7. How can you show love to your enemy?
8. How can your Christian love be a witness for Jesus Christ?
9. What does it mean for you to be “perfect” (verse 48)?
10. How can you put these principles into action this week?