

“Kingdom Living – Beyond Forgiveness”

Matthew 5:38-48

January 13, 2002

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Friends of mine, who have four young children, are open-hearted people.

Another young couple, with four children of their own and another soon to be born, came to my friends' church as relatively new believers and with an apparent zeal for God.

Shortly thereafter this other young couple let it be known that they needed a place to live until their house was completed in two weeks.

My friends, whom I shall re-name David and Melissa, happily offered their finished basement, to the homeless family.

Two weeks quickly passed and David and Melissa were increasingly concerned.

The guest-dad was always gone and the young mother sat around reading her Bible while her children went unsupervised and literally wrecking the basement – running water ruining the floors while the mother was there but praying.

David and Melissa learned that the reason the other family had no home was that they had given theirs away.

The baby was born and they had no crib for it because they had given it away just before the baby was born.

The woman volunteered that the reason for their generosity was that they were “Sermon on the Mount” kind of people.

They said Jesus told them to “Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

They took him seriously, she said, and thus they would give anything and everything.

The woman further said that she had the gift of rebuking people and regularly rebuked Melissa for not reading her Bible enough and for not having the same giving attitude that she and her husband had.

My friend, David, loaned a power tool to a neighbor who returned it broken.

David indicated he was reluctant to loan another tool to him for which David was roundly rebuked for not being willing to keep loaning until all his tools were broken – after all Jesus said, “if someone wants to take your shirt, give him your coat as well.”

When asked about caring for her own children, the woman said that God promised to take care of them if she would be obedient to read her Bible and pray.

After two and ½ months of Melissa caring for nine children and her house being abused while the other woman attended Bible studies and read her Bible and prayed, when she was not rebuking Melissa, David and Melissa finally said “enough” and asked them to leave.

But Melissa was deeply troubled by the woman’s words.

Was this other woman right? Was Melissa unspiritual?  
Had David and Melissa disobeyed God by not being willing to let them stay there forever?

What does Jesus mean when he says, “Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you?”

Open your Bible, please, to Matthew 5:38.

Look carefully at Jesus’ words and ask yourself the question, “What does he mean?”

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

MT 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I tell you: **Love** your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> 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. <sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Strong words, aren't they?

- “Don't resist an evil person.”
- “Love your enemies.”
- “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.”

These words of Jesus are recorded for us in what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

Before this, Jesus had been traveling all over the area of Galilee doing many kinds of miracles and teaching that the “kingdom of heaven is near.”

This concept of the “kingdom of heaven” was very important to Jesus.

As we have seen before, the word “kingdom” was not a reference to “heaven” that is yet to come but a reference to God's authority and presence.

And what he meant was that God's presence, power and authority was even **now** available to all of us in Jesus.

Those who trust in Jesus are brought into this “kingdom” – this new relationship with God here and now.

And as citizens of the “kingdom of heaven” we are called and enabled to live a new kind of life – radically different from how we have lived.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing the lifestyle of a “kingdom” citizen – a Christian – a Christ-follower.

There is something else we must bear in mind as we look at this description of kingdom living.

It is only by grace that we **become** part of the kingdom of heaven, here and now, **and** it is only by grace that we can **live out** the new lifestyle of the “kingdom”.

As part of **his** “kingdom” and made able by His Spirit he calls us to a whole new way of living – “kingdom living”.

And that is what this text and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount will do – it will show us the awesome possibilities of kingdom living.

In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus illustrates “kingdom living” by citing six relational issues and the difference between the way we usually respond compared with his new, high calling on our lives.

We have previously looked at the first four illustrations and today we come to the last two illustrations.

I want us to look at both illustrations together today because the one so logically and experientially flows out of the other.

In both cases Jesus introduces the illustrations the same way he has the others:

Verses 38 and 43 “You have heard that it was said...but I tell you...”

He contrasts the way we would normally respond, with the new possibility of responding as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

In the first illustration, beginning with verse 38, Jesus begins by quoting OT Law, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’”

In that He is quoting Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy where for example we read:

Exodus 21:23-25

“But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

When Jesus next says, “But I tell you...” we might think that he is contradicting the OT Law.

But Jesus is not contradicting the **Law**, he is reacting to its abuse.

An “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth” kind of justice was and still is necessary.

The principle is this kind of justice is that there must be just recompense for injury done to another.

This law is not harsh, but actually avoided injustice by checking the wild kind of revenge that we usually want – where the response doesn’t fit the offense.

But justice was a community matter not a personal one.

Justice is not to be determined by an individual but by the state.

Jesus is not contradicting community justice, he is contradicting personal revenge.

The world lives as if “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” means personal recompense or retaliation.

Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn asked his friend Buck, “What is a feud?”

Buck responded, “Why, where was you raised, Huck? Don’t you know what a feud is?”

- “A feud is when one man has a quarrel with another and kills him.
- Then the other man’s brother kills him.
- Then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another.
- Then the cousins chip in – and by and by everybody is killed off, and there ain’t no more feud.
- But it’s kind of slow, and it takes a long time. (Cited in Bruner 212)

Normally we think, “If you kick me then I kick you.”

If you do me a favor, then I am indebted to do you a favor.

Always equality, never up and never down, always equals.

We maintain our pride in this way – we are neither taken advantage of or beholden to anyone.

We keep even. That’s the way it’s done.

But Jesus says, in verse 39, “I tell you, do not resist an evil person.”

Please note that Jesus is not commanding that civil authorities disarm or that nations capitulate to evil.

He is not saying governments have no right to resist evil.  
Again he is speaking against personal revenge.

The phrase, “do not resist” speaks of not holding court on your own and determining the justice that you need to mete out.

Dispensing justice in punishment is not the private Christian’s responsibility.

Then what is the “kingdom” person’s response to an offense committed against him or her?

Look at Jesus’ examples.

Please note I called them examples.

There is nothing to suggest that Jesus here is giving us an exhaustive catalog of proper responses to situations.

He is illustrating how a change of attitude might manifest itself.

Matthew 5:39b “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

This “strike” or slap is an insult – it is right-handed person using the back of his hand to slap the cheek of another.

This was not an assault on the body but an insult to the honor.

The old rule of retaliation was, if he insults me, I insult him.

- It’s six-year-olds, “You’re a baby!” “No, you’re a baby!”
- It’s fourteen-year-olds, “You’re fat!” “And your mother’s ugly.”
- It’s forty-year-olds getting cut off in traffic and then getting in front and slowing down.
- It’s getting cheated out of a place on the team or a portion of a bonus and planning how to get even.

But Jesus says that “kingdom” people turn the other cheek.

He is not saying that if someone gouges out your right eye you should offer him your left eye.

He is not saying we are to be blind to injustice.

He himself recognized the situation as “evil” – he said don’t resist an evil person.

He's not denying the injustice of the act and he's not asking us to deny reality.

**He is asking us to consider our response.**

He went on, "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic (the long undergarment worn by people in Jesus' day), let him have your cloak (the long outer garment) as well."

In the examples Jesus moves from talking about your honor being insulted to your possessions being taken.

Jesus is not saying we can't appeal appropriately to government or community for justice.

Even the apostle Paul appealed for justice.

But revenge or a spirit of retaliation, Jesus says, is out of the question.

Here's the way the Apostle Paul said it to the people in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 6:7-8 "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.

Again, we are not being asked to deny reality but to consider our response.

Look at the third example: "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."

This was about being exploited.

The Roman army occupied Israel at this time and a soldier had the ability to force an Israelite to carry his gear up to a mile.

This was obviously a nuisance but more so, it was degrading for a subjugated people.

The powerful could exploit the weak.

- It's a boss who abuses his authority almost forcing you to work longer hours or do tasks that don't fit your job.
- It's a spouse who uses power or position to pressure you to do what you don't want to do.

- It's a coach or a teacher who makes fun of you or is unfair and you are in no position to defend yourself.

Again Jesus is not saying we pretend this is okay.

And he is not saying we stand by while others are exploited.

He is saying that when we are exploited we are to have a different attitude.

Look at the last example in verse 42 and think about my friends David and Melissa whom I mentioned earlier,

“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

This addresses the mundane of everyday – those pushy, demanding, undependable people who would take advantage of us.

Augustine notes that we are not told to give whatever someone asks but to whomever asks.

You wouldn't hand a gun to a killer.

Luther wrote that we don't give to just anybody who happens to have a whim for what we have but we are ready to give to the one who really needs it.

Jesus is not asking us to give away everything we have but to give away our self-centeredness that reacts so sharply to any offense.

When we are offended, stolen from, exploited, or taken advantage of, our natural response is to retaliate.

And often the offense, when it is great, becomes our whole world – we can think of nothing else and all of life is colored by a driven-ness to get even or at least a smoldering bitterness.

Let me repeat something I said earlier.

These examples are not an exhaustive set of new rules by which we must now live as Christians.

These are examples of a new attitude.

If I considered the list complete and I took them in woodenly literal way I might say:

“If he strikes my on the right cheek I turn the other to him but if he strikes me on the left cheek then I knock his block off”.

True kingdom living is not guided by a set of rules.

A kingdom lifestyle, godliness, Christ-likeness, is more the result of an attitude shaped by the Holy Spirit in the midst of ever-changing situations.

If we turn Jesus’ words into “laws” we will turn his words on their head – and wind up exactly opposite of where he wants us.

By human will power alone we can often obey rules, but it takes the supernatural work of God to change the heart, to change our attitudes.

We naturally want our idea of justice to guide our relationships, when Jesus wants our love to guide all our relationships.

That leads us to the next and last of six situations Jesus uses to illustrate a “kingdom” lifestyle.

Matthew 5:43-44 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

Here the situation intensifies from those who occasionally do harm to you or me to those who live to do harm to us – those who consider you or me their enemy.

One man said, “Few of us manage to go through life without collecting a group of individuals who would not be sorry to learn that we had died.” (Willard 181)

When Jesus says “You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” he was not saying that was what the OT taught.

Certainly in the OT there are numerous places where God's people are taught to love their neighbor but nowhere are they taught to hate their enemy.

Apparently however freedom to hate one's enemy was the popular understanding of people.

I'll love nice people, I'll love my own people, and I'll love those who will love me. I'll get along with those who are like me.

"Believe as I believe, no more, no less;  
That I am right, and no one else, confess;  
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;  
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;  
Look as I look, do always as I do;  
Then, and only then, will I fellowship with you." (source unknown)

In contrast: Ramon Narvaez, the nineteenth century Prime Minister of Spain, was dying and was asked by a priest, "Does your Excellency forgive all your enemies?" The Prime Minister replied, "I do not have to forgive my enemies, I have had them all shot". (From Robinson The Christian Salt and Light Company 174).

Jesus certainly doesn't say to murder your enemies.

But neither does he say ignore your enemy, as if that was possible anyway.

Nor does he say endure your enemy, as if equanimity was sufficient.

Jesus says "love your enemy."

This gets very practical. Who comes to your mind?

Who has been hostile to you? Who wouldn't be sorry if you dropped off the edge of the earth?

You didn't have anything against them but they apparently had something against you.

And the longer it has gone on, the more they have now become your enemy.

Jesus says "love them". What does that look like?

**It looks like praying for them.**

**Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for them”**

Fredrick Bruner wrote, “There is an alchemy present in prayer that can only be described as miraculous. More than psychological forces are at work in prayer for enemies; slowly but surely real spiritual energies are inserted into the will until – as surprisingly for disciples as for enemies – something like a little actual love for the other person begins to come flowing (or dripping) out.” (Bruner 220)

Lutheran pastor Deitrich Bonhoeffer assassinated by the Nazis wrote, “(Prayer for our enemy) is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God... For if we pray for them, we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves. (Bonhoeffer [The Cost of Discipleship](#)166)

Jesus did this when he prayed sincerely, Luke 23:34 “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”

**We** can do this only by looking not at how the enemy is treating us but how Jesus is treating us.

Romans 5:8 “For God showed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ **died** for us.”

Colossians 1:21-22 “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled...through (Jesus’) death...”

And so as forgiven and loved enemies of God we forgive and love those who hate us – **and we pray for them.**

120 years ago AF Vilmar wrote, “We do not reciprocate their hatred and contention, although they would like it better if we did, and so sink to their own level. (So) how **is** the battle to be fought?... (We will pray) the prayer of earnest love for these... who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred, and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us. It will be a prayer for the peace of these erring, devastated, and bewildered souls, a prayer for the

same love and peace which we ourselves enjoy, a prayer which will penetrate to the depths of their souls and (tear) their hearts more grievously than anything they can do to us. AFC Vilmar of 1880 quoted by Bonhoeffer in 1937:

**We not only pray for our enemies, in verse 47 Jesus clearly implies that we are to “greet” our enemies –**

He said, “And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?”

Now we are not just privately praying for them, we are face to face with them.

This greeting is not a perfunctory “hello” but a heartfelt desire for their welfare.

This is not cold civility toward our enemies – this is warm consideration for them.

This is not just saying the best but sincerely wishing God’s best for them.

**There is yet a third description of love for our enemies:**

The Gospel writer Luke, in a passage parallel to this one, cites Jesus as saying, Luke 6:27-28 “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Consistent with the intent of Matthew, Luke adds “do good to those who mistreat you”.

You pray for your enemies, you sincerely wish for your enemies God’s best and you do good to them.

Stanton was Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of war –probably the most important position in Lincoln’s cabinet.

But Stanton had always hated Lincoln and was his bitterest opponent making fun even of Lincoln’s looks and seeking to embarrass him at every opportunity.

Lincoln’s other advisors thought he was making a serious mistake in appointing such a bitter enemy to such an important post.

When, years later, Lincoln died, Stanton called Lincoln one of the greatest men who ever lived.

If Lincoln had returned Stanton's hate both men would have gone to their deaths bitter enemies.

Lincoln had often said, "I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends."

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, "To do him a wrong was to beget a kindness from him. For his heart was so rich...that if you sowed therein seeds of hate, they blossomed love."

(In H. Robinson Christian Salt and Light Company 181)

Is that us?

Listen to Jesus again,

Matthew 5:39, 44, 48 "I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."

The "perfect" Jesus calls for here is not perfect as in coldly without error but perfectly mature, like Jesus, or as Luke more warmly puts it, "merciful"- having the same attitude Jesus had.

**It has to do with a heart that is radically changed.**

An attitude and conduct that is very different from what we would normally be and do.

The better I know myself and the longer I observe human nature, I know how humanly impossible this teaching of Jesus is.

Martin Luther understood this when he wrote, "This word is too high and too hard that anyone should fulfill it. This is proved not merely by our Lord's word but by our own experience and feeling. Take any upright man or woman. He will get along very nicely with those who do not provoke him, but let someone proffer only the slightest irritation and he will flare up in anger,...if not against friends, then against enemies. Flesh and blood cannot rise above it." (in Bainton's Luther

p46 cited in Bruner 212)

What do you think as you hear Jesus' description of a "kingdom" attitude?

Does it come off as naïve, unrealistic, not to be seriously entertained?

It would be hopelessly naïve if anyone other than Jesus had spoken these words.

Augustine wrote, "To love those who love you is human; to hate those who love you is demonic; but to love those who hate you is divine."

It takes an act of God to bring this about in us.

We must remember that this kingdom lifestyle grows out of a relationship rather than producing that relationship.

"Be perfect" is not a command one is to keep in order to belong to God – but belonging to God, we are to emulate our Father.

Jesus is the one with whom we must have a relationship in order to live the "kingdom" life he offers.

We simply will not be willing or able to live the "kingdom life" unless we believe that Jesus is God's (appointed) Savior **enabling** us to live it.

Someone wrote so well, "The height of the Sermon on the Mount is clearly love; its depth is clearly faith." (Bruner 225)

Jesus is not first of all calling us to **do** what he does but to **be** what he is.

He calls us to be permeated with love – to act out of hearts of love rather trying to act in ways contrary to our hearts.

We need God to change us from the inside out.

I don't want to walk out of here thinking I must do better at loving people and not retaliating when offended.

I don't want a mental list of what I'm going to do in relationship to someone who has offended me or who considers me an enemy.

I want to bow before God and acknowledge that I need a heart transplant, I need his kind of love, I need for him to act because I can't.

Without his intervention, I will turn these words into law and try to live up to the law.

But I will fail in the future as I have in the past.

I need him to infuse my heart with his kind of love – and I must want it.

It is precisely that new “kingdom” power to love that Jesus came announcing and he offers today.

Will we receive it, will you receive him?