

Kingdom Relationships Part 5: *Loving People Who Hate, Hurt, or Humiliate Us*

Matt. 5:38-48

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is laying out for his followers the laws and principles that govern the kingdom of God and this morning we come to some of the heaviest lifting in the sermon: How are we, as followers of Christ, to deal with someone who does evil to us. How does Jesus want us to treat our enemies? How are we to respond to someone who hurts us, or hates us, or publicly humiliates us? What Jesus instructs us to do is so radically counter-intuitive and so against what we feel like doing, that it can only be done by the love of God working in us. So let's pause for a moment and ask for Him to do His work in our hearts this morning.

I think I know what some of you are thinking. Words like *not resisting the one who is evil* and *turning the other cheek* and *loving our enemy* make you uncomfortable cause you wonder, "how far are we supposed to take this?" Honestly, this is one of those passages where, for many of us, our first response isn't "yes, Lord" it's more like, "yeah, but...". Yeah, but, does this mean we can't defend ourselves or our families from a someone intent on evil? Yeah, but, does this mean that if we find out that an employee has been stealing from our business that we should give them a raise? If someone is out to hurt me, am I just supposed to roll over? I think that's what some of you are thinking because as I began to prepare this message that's where my mind immediately went. And the truth is it is really important that we keep Jesus' words in context or these are words that, misapplied, could land us in real trouble. So there will be some qualifications and interpretive explanations as we go, but at the outset let's remind ourselves that we don't want to get so focused on what Jesus *isn't* saying that we miss what he *is* saying. Because even when we understand the context and meaning of these words perfectly, there is no doubt that Jesus is calling us to love with a radical, doesn't-fit-the-world's-mold, doesn't even really make sense, kind of love.

I. Jesus calls us to love those who hate, hurt, and humiliate us

That's the bottom line here. Jesus' answer to how we are to deal with people who hate, hurt, or humiliate us? We are to love them with a supernatural love. We are to act like our heavenly Father who is good and kind to those who love Him and those who hate Him alike. We are to act like Jesus who, remember, loved us when we were still his enemies.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Rom. 5:8, 10

Jesus didn't die for us when we were his friends, he died for us when we were his enemies, in order to make us his friends. Jesus didn't die for us when we loved him, he died for us when we hated him, in order to cause us to love him. That is the glory and the beauty of the gospel. God loving us when we hated Him! So when Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he is simply calling us to walk in his footsteps. And there are two expressions of that supernatural love that Jesus calls us to:

1. Love with a love that doesn't retaliate

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42 ESV)

The OT law said *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* and it is important for us to understand that Jesus isn't contradicting or negating the law. He says that he didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (vs. 17). So when he says "you have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' but I say to you, he must mean something other than "don't listen to the law anymore, this part doesn't count anymore." Jesus isn't abolishing the law, he's correcting misguided interpretations of the law by the Pharisees and scribes.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth wasn't meant to be a prescription for personal conduct, it was meant to guide civic law and courts as they presided over the Israelite community. So, for instance, if your neighbor accidentally or purposely killed one of your livestock, eye for an eye didn't mean you walked over to their property and killed one of his livestock. It meant that you took it to the elders (the court of their day) and they would then, according to this law, make sure the punishment fit the crime. It is actually meant to restrict the courts so that they didn't exact far more from the guilty person than the crime deserved. The punishment is to fit the crime. That's a good legal principle that's a foundation to our legal system today. But the Pharisees had misapplied this to mean that it was ok to seek personal retaliation.

Jesus isn't abolishing the civic law of justice for the wronged and proportional punishment for the offender. Jesus isn't calling us to step aside and allow evil to flourish unchecked. There's nothing loving about letting evil people do whatever they want to do unopposed. What Jesus is forbidding us to do here is retaliation - taking matters into our own hands and seeking revenge.

Jesus lays out four examples here and none of them are life threatening or criminal acts. In that day, few things were as insulting as being slapped, but when Jesus says if someone slaps you on the right cheek, because most people are right handed it implies a back handed slap which was consider twice as insulting as a front handed slap. In fact the fine for a back handed slap was twice as much as for a front handed slap. Because it was twice as demeaning. A slap doesn't cause physical injury, but it is humiliating.

The next example is someone suing for your shirt, making a legal claim. The third example is based on Roman law that allowed a Roman soldier to compel the natives of a conquered land to carry their pack for one mile - no more, no less. For the Jewish man, this was a terrible humiliation to bear, not only because he was the soldier's slave for one mile, but because it reminded them that they weren't a free people, they were a conquered people. The fourth example frankly seems to step out of the wronged category, but probably is addressing the stingy and condescending way the Pharisees looked at the poor. They may give, but it was begrudgingly and with resentment at having to do so. Jesus says we should give and lend without begrudging or holding that person in contempt.

Our normal response to being hurt, hated or humiliated is to want to retaliate. We want to hurt them back, humiliate them back, hate them back. And there's a sweetness to retaliation. When someone slaps us,

nothing feels so good as to haul off and deck them! It feels good to see someone who tried to hurt us get hurt, humiliate us get humiliated! But it's not good for our souls. The desire for retaliation seeps into us and changes us. It chokes love out of us and replaces it with hatred and bitterness. We become bitter people who hold grudges against people, secretly wanting them to pay for what they've done to us. I read about an extreme example of retaliation out of control. I couldn't believe it was true until I looked it up for myself and saw it on the front page of the Spokane Daily Chronicle, dated Nov. 23, 1940. A man named Denis Donohue III wrote these words in his will with his own hand:

"Unto my two daughters, Frances Marie and Denise Victoria, by reason of their unfilial attitude toward a doting father, . . . I leave the sum of \$1.00 to each and a father's curse. May their lives be fraught with misery, unhappiness, and poignant sorrow. May their deaths be soon and of a lingering malignant and torturous nature. May their souls rest in hell and suffer the torments of the condemned for eternity."

His daughters were young at the time: Denise was 18 and Frances just a few years older when he wrote this. How did this man get to such a dark and evil place? It's the downward spiral of vindictiveness - the desire to hurt those who he felt had hurt shriveled his soul until his thirst for vengeance stripped him of a father's love for his daughters. This is an extreme case, but Jesus warns us not to seek retaliation because it saps our hearts of love (which by its nature wants the best for someone) and replaces it with hate that wants the harm of the other person. Retaliating takes our souls to a dark place. That's why the Bible warns us, *"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. God can handle repaying and vengeance without it messing up His heart but it would seem that we can't.*

Retaliation comes in many forms but at its core it's wanting to hurt back, to hit back. To say words that cut that person down. To hurt their reputation through gossip. Even to fantasize about bad things happening to them is a form of retaliation. We don't actually have to do them harm, just wanting to do them harm is a spirit of retaliation. If someone is living in your head rent free - you often think about their demise or foster a desire to see harm come to them, be careful. Retaliation is knocking at your door.

Instead, Jesus tells us not to retaliate but to leverage the hurt and humiliation to promote love. If someone slaps you, turn your face and give them a clear shot at the other cheek. If they sue for your shirt, give them your coat as well. If they compel you to walk one mile, at the completion of the first mile - which was compelled - volunteer another mile. In each of these cases, you're not only refusing to retaliate, you're giving them more than they've tried to take from you. It's a kind of jiu jitsu of love: you're flipping hate on its head by promoting love in the situation. You're answering their hurtfulness with kindness.

Sometimes when I get in an argument and it gets heated, I think if I say something hurtful enough, they'll realize how wrong they are and apologize. It never works that way. Hurtful words beget hurtful words. Marriages can be torn apart by hurt spouses trying to hurt their spouses back. How many troubled marriages are two people who feel hurt and wounded by the other person, and each one is trying to fix the problem by out-hurting the other? What they're finding is retaliation begets retaliation. It's a cycle that just gets worse each time around. Jesus says "break the cycle". Respond to their hurtful words with kind words. Jesus isn't asking us to lie, or be insincere. He's simply saying, find a kind way to respond to the hurt or the humiliation. If they hurt your pride, humble yourself even more. Give them more than they ask

for. Show them kindness when they show you contempt. Allow the love of Jesus into the situation and see what God does!

Someone might say, "what if it doesn't work? What if they keep on being unkind or trying to humiliate me?" This isn't about it "working". This isn't a technique to fix the other person. It's a way of protecting our souls from the destructive toll that desiring revenge takes on our souls. It's a way of following Jesus' example and walking in love. It doesn't "work" in the sense of a formula, but it will bear good fruit in your life, and often it will bear good fruit - always better fruit - in the life of the other person too.

Now a word of caution and qualification is needed: We're not talking about being doormats, and we're not talking about allowing someone to abuse us or seriously harm us or someone else. The examples Jesus gives are neither life threatening or emotionally abusive. If our well being or someone else's is in jeopardy, we should take preventative and protective measures if possible. If you are the victim of abuse, or you know someone who is, that isn't the time to turn the other cheek, it's time to get help.

If someone does something that is illegal or endangers the welfare of others or even something that, if we allowed them to get away with it, would only encourage and enable them to hurt others, we need to take appropriate steps to stop them. It's not loving or just to allow bad and evil acts to go unpunished or unopposed. But even then, we can seek and love justice and protection for innocent victims, but we need to be on the alert against a desire to retaliate and get vengeance. We can love justice without loving revenge. There's a big difference. Jesus calls us to love with a love that doesn't retaliate.

2. Love with a love that prays for our enemies

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48 ESV)

The OT does say that we are to love our neighbor, but the verbal version that the Pharisees had popularized had subtracted something and added something: it took out that we are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*, and it added that we are to *hate our enemy*. That's not in there! But the Pharisees were advocating a watered down love that loves those that love you and hates those who don't. That's normal. That's what makes sense to us.

But Jesus takes us to the summit of redemption and shows us the panorama of God's love and the glory of our Lord's kingdom where love doesn't trickle, it gushes, and he says, be like your Father in heaven. Anyone can love those who love them, anyone can be kind to those who like them, it doesn't take the transforming power of God to accomplish that. But your Father is kind - truly kind - to those who hate Him. He blesses those who curse Him by giving rain and sun and good things to them. Jesus says, you're His son, you're His daughter, so display the family resemblance.

Love your enemies. That doesn't make sense. I don't want to love my enemies - if I wanted to love them they wouldn't be my enemies. Honestly, I don't even know how to do that. I don't feel like I have a lot of enemies in my life but there are people who I feel like have deliberately tried to hurt me or malign me, and it's hard not to see them through the grid of they're against me, I'm against them. We're enemies.

Years ago on Long Island this guy named Bob who attended the church I pastored came up to me in a parking lot and just lit into me. He tended to be a bit hyper-spiritual and he disagreed with some things going on in the church but this wasn't just a case of disagreeing. He read me the riot act - judged my motives, accused me of all kinds of terrible things, and told me that God was against me. As an example of God being against me and trying to get my attention, he reminded me how the church van ran out of gas while I was driving it the week before. It was a rainy day and I ran out of gas before I could get to the gas station. He knew it happened because he drove by and saw me (he didn't pull over to help). I told him I didn't see that as God's judgment but as God's kindness cause I was right by a gas station where they lent me a gas can with some gas in it. And yes, maybe it was dumb not to have gotten gas before that, but there were many drivers and the last driver left it with an empty tank. Anyway he tore into me in the name of God and walked away.

A week later his wife kicked him out of the house and he was fired from his job. I admit a part of me was, "all right God! Way to pay him back for what he said to me!" Vengeance! But no, the reality is God wasn't punishing him for his unkind words to me. He was going through a rough time, a lot of it his own making, and probably part of the pressure he was going through leaked out on me. He was right about some of what he said about my decisions by the way. I don't think he was right about my motives, but I do think he was right some of the things I did were not wise or directed by the Lord. Years later we were able to reestablish a friendly relationship.

One of the ways we can love our enemies is by praying for them. Lifting them up to God. I didn't hate Bob, I prayed for Bob. I tell this story because, while the situation might look different, a lot of times our enemies are hurting people. Their anger, hatred, hurtfulness, or just the way they're out to get us is fueled by trouble or pain going on in their lives. They may be hurting even as they're trying to hurt us. Hurt people hurt people. As we pray for them, we find it harder to hate them, harder to call them our enemy. And sometimes, by loving them and praying for them, we can move them out of the category of enemy and into the category of friend.

The gospel is all about this. We were God's enemies, but now Jesus says we're his friends. He loved when we still hated him. He saved us when we despised Him. Grace. Gospel. Jesus.

Let's close by singing "The Father's Love"

If you're not a Christian, God wants you to know that He loves you no matter where you're at or what you've done. He sent Jesus to save you, but you need to reach out and ask him to save you. He won't force you. Will you pray with me now?