

The King Who Calls Us to Love in Conflict

Matthew 5:38-48

One of the best windows into understanding whose agenda we're truly promoting, whose vision and kingdom we're truly serving, is how we respond in the face of personal offense. When someone wrongs us.

Several years ago I saw a film called *To End All Wars*, a true story about an Allied prisoner of war camp, who were among the 61,000 POWs conscripted to build a railroad across Thailand and Burma, as the Japanese planned to invade India during the second World War. It became known as the railway of death, because so many prisoners died in its construction.

The film is based on the autobiography of one of the characters, Ernest Gordon, a Scotsman. It is not for young audiences. As Eric Metaxas says in his review, "This movie is bloody, violent, and profound, portraying a raw, full-throated Christianity."¹ It gives a very honest and troubling picture of violence and evil, not just of the captors, but also of the captives. And it's within this camp, stripped of his rights, stripped of his dignity, in the face of the most grievous personal offense imaginable, that Gordon is forced to wrestle with the questions:

"Who is my neighbor? What does it mean to love one's enemies? How many times shall I forgive my brother? What can a man give in exchange for his soul? These are the questions I faced in the prison camp," says Gordon. "The answers changed my life forever."²

Those same questions are presented before us this morning. And though we praise God that the direness of whatever conflict or personal offense we may find ourselves in no doubt pales in comparison to the brutality and wickedness of a WWII prison camp, we still find ourselves facing offense in various ways. Becoming the subject of gossip at school, or of criticism at work. Finding ourselves rejected, betrayed, taken advantage of, even physically hurt. And how we respond to that personal offense goes a long way toward exposing whose agenda and whose kingdom we're committed to following. Will we demand justice and vindication, in defense of our rights? (That's the American way.) Will we quickly draw up sides and decide our interaction with others based on whether they're for or against us? Or will we follow the counter-intuitive and counter-cultural pattern of Jesus' kingdom, and respond with mercy and love for all whom we encounter, even our enemies?

¹ Eric Metaxas, "To End All Christian Films," *Books & Culture*, Jul-Aug. 2002. Available at: <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2002/julaug/1.6.html>.

² *To End All Wars* (2001).

The Heart of the Law and the Kingdom of God

Over the past few weeks we've seen how what God had instructed his covenant people Israel to be and to do through the Law given in the Old Testament, he is now bringing to fulfillment through his eternal Son, Jesus, and the kingdom he is establishing. A kingdom that, as we have seen and will continue to see, looks quite different from the kingdoms of this world. Jesus' kingdom even looks different from how the Jewish leaders of his day were living, though they claimed to serving God and following the same law. But their obedience to that law was superficial—phony—and underneath was their own self-glorifying agenda.

In Matthew 5:21-48, as part of his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been exposing this hypocritical misuse of the Law, while at the same time showing us the true heart of God's law and the righteousness it was aiming for in the first place—a righteousness that is deeper than what we do with our hands and that comes ultimately from a heart changed by Jesus. So far he's touched on the subjects of murder and anger, on adultery and the holiness of marriage, on oaths and integrity of speech. And each correction he offers comes with the very authority of God himself. Notice the pattern: "You have heard it said . . . But *I* say to you . . ." Not, "thus says the Lord," but "I say to you." Jesus is greater than Moses because he speaks as God himself.

So what does he deal with in our passage this morning, vv. 38-48? We have our final two sayings or corrections here, the first one in vv. 38-42, and then 43-48. And both of them speak to how we respond when faced with personal conflict or offense. Verse 39: "But I tell you, Do not resist *an evil person*." How do we respond when others harm us or attempt evil against us? And v. 43: "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*" (5:43-44). How do we treat those who oppose or oppress us—what he calls our "enemies"?

Now, these verses have spurred a lot of conversation and debate about pacifism and non-violence at national and local governmental levels, whether the state should use force to restrain evil, and if so, whether Christians should ever participate in it. And those are legitimate questions, but these verses don't really help us solve them, because the context here focuses *personal* offense rather than public policy. Both of the Old Testament passages Jesus cites he is applying to personal offense or injury. And each of the examples that Jesus offers are examples of personal offense—occasions when we are deprived of our honor, our stuff, our time and energy, even our money. So the question is, How should members of God's kingdom, who submit to Jesus' authority as King, respond to those who personally wrong them—which as Jesus has already warned is not going to be uncommon for his followers (cf. 5:10-11)? And how we respond tells us a lot about whose kingdom we're actually serving.

Losing Love for Self

Let's look at the two ideas Jesus is addressing. The first one is in v. 38: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'" This is the famous *lex talionis*, or "law of retaliation," which is cited three times in the Old Testament law (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21), but can be found in ancient legal codes as old as the Code of Hammurabi, and continues to this day as one of the major foundations for defining justice. So when someone wrongs you, and you take them to court, the idea here is that if they are found guilty, whatever punishment the court decides should be equal to but not exceeding the extent of the crime (i.e. you can take an

eye for an eye, but you cannot take a life for an eye). You are entitled to that much, but no more. Not only did this set a standard for justice, it was designed to restrain God's people from taking justice into their own hands, and to stop vengeance from spiraling out of control into an escalating cycle of revenge and family feuds—like the Hatfields and the McCoys.

The second law comes from the same verse that Jesus later refers to as the second greatest commandment. Verse 43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” But listen to the full verse in Leviticus 19:18: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” Notice two things here. First, the religious leaders had added a second part to the command. Leviticus 19 tells us to love our neighbors, but it says nothing about hating our enemies. Perhaps they thought that was the logical conclusion; but as we'll see, this is not so. Second, the purpose of this command, as we read the whole verse in context, is almost identical to the purpose of the law of retaliation: to restrain vengeance. The first part of the verse again: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people . . .” Rather, instead of vengeance and getting even, love your neighbor as yourself.

Both of the laws that Jesus addresses were designed to restrain revenge or retaliation in response to personal offenses between God's people. But as with the other examples, the Pharisees seem here to have used these laws to justify the very activity they were designed to control. Instead of restraining revenge and promoting love, they used them to restrain love and promote self. They made much of the law of retaliation when they stood to gain from it. When offended, they demanded their rights and the restitution they deserved: ‘I want justice. I want what I have coming.’ At the same time they made little of their enemies and others who were not like them. They showed partiality to their friends and animosity to their enemies.

This is our natural tendency (if you can speak of fallen hearts in natural terms). Our default in world filled with opposition and offense is twofold: (1) we show kindness to those who are for us, and who love us in return; and (2) we seek revenge for any who would oppose us, or get in our way. To put it in stark and not-so-charitable terms, we basically operate by playground rules. As long as you keep your distance from the toy I'm playing on, we can share this space and be happy. But if you muscle in on the swing I was headed for, then watch out. As the Honest Toddler on Twitter tells us, “Nobody wants to throw sand. These situations find you. Park justice is swift but messy. Not for the infirm.”³ That's how we roll.

How do you respond when someone wrongs you? Do you go after justice, taking matters into your own hands? Do you respond so that those who hurt you feel the same pain they caused you? Do you demand vindication—to have your name cleared of the charges, and restitution—to be repaid for the cost of the wrongs? Do you stand on your rights?

In the film I mentioned earlier, *To End All Wars*, this was the posture taken by one of the main characters, Major Ian Campbell. Campbell, in outrage toward the unjust conditions of the camp, and in loyalty to his slain commanding officer, vows to seek justice. In response to evil, Campbell says, “I recommend defiance. Justice for the captives. An eye for an eye.” And through his influence he lays the groundwork for a bloody rebellion.

³ @HonestToddler, August, 29, 2012. Available at: <https://twitter.com/HonestToddler>.

And that makes a lot of sense to us. It seems fair and right—to treat those who have wronged us with the same kind of wrongs. It feels like justice. And it’s the way this world works.

Yet as we look at this passage, we see that Jesus’ kingdom is entirely different from this world. And those who follow him as King respond to conflict in an entirely different way. Not by demanding our rights and limiting our love, but with a self-giving love that’s unlimited—not restricted to those who love in return. A love that displays the love of the Father through Jesus Christ.

Losing Self for Love

Look again at what Jesus says in vv. 38-39: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. . . .” What in the world does Jesus mean, don’t resist an evil person? This is completely shocking, and counter to all our expectations and desires. It’s just as counter-intuitive as what he says in vv. 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.” Why would Jesus say this? How does not resisting evil, but instead loving our enemies, accomplish anything good in such a messed up world? And what does it look like anyway?

In vv. 39-42 Jesus gives four examples that explain what he means by “not resisting an evil person.” In short, he calls his followers not to respond to personal offense by protecting and demanding our rights, but with self-giving love that demonstrates the gospel of Jesus.

Let’s look at the examples. The first one is in v. 39: “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” This is one of the most famous phrases of the Sermon on the Mount—turn the other cheek. Here the offense has more to do with insult than injury. Sure it hurts to get slapped in the cheek, but the picture of being struck in the *right* cheek is almost certainly a backhanded slap, which then and in a lot of cultures today was a severe insult that hurts the pride even more than the face. It was something under Jewish law for which someone could even seek damages, not unlike a libel or slander suit today.

So when you are insulted in such a derogatory way, how should you respond? You coworker calls out your mistake in the staff meeting for everyone to shake their head at, and you know that they made a mistake far worse than yours just a few weeks beforehand. Your classmate starts a rumor about you, that’s actually true about them. Your competitor criticizes and humiliates you in public. What do you do? Take them to court and sue them for all their worth? Strike them back and bring upon them the shame they caused you? Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek.” Lay down your rights and absorb the insult. Love them at great expense to yourself, that they might see the love of Jesus.

The second example is in v. 40: “And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” In the first example, someone tried to steal your honor. Here they’re trying to take your stuff. But rather than demanding your rights, Jesus says ‘Lay them down. Give them your cloak too. Love them at great personal cost.’ This is significant because the cloak was literally protected by Jewish law. As Sinclair Ferguson explains, “If it were taken as a financial pledge, it had to be returned before nightfall (Ex. 22:24), because for some it served as both body clothing and bed clothing. Again, Jesus’ point is that when his followers meet with

opposition and persecution, they should not stand on their legal rights. Instead, where the sin of others abounds, grace in them should abound much more.”⁴

The third example is in v. 41: “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” In the first century, Judea was occupied territory, and a Roman soldier was permitted by law to conscript others take carry their baggage or load for up to but not exceeding 1,000 paces—about a mile. Similar to what happened to Simon of Cyrene who was forced to carry Jesus’ cross (Matt. 27:32). It’s insulting to be treated like a slave, for people to steal your time and your energy. And though you want to get revenge, there’s no legal recourse for it in this case. But Jesus says, if they make you go one mile, surprise them and take it two. Go the second mile (as we say)—love them at great personal cost. Just as God has loved us in Jesus.

The fourth example is in v. 42: “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” There doesn’t seem to be any coercion in this example; someone is asking for a gift or a loan. And yet such a gift or loan will deprive you of money you could otherwise spend on yourself. Money you own and have a right do with whatever you want. How do you respond at such a request? Hold tightly to what belongs to you so that you can spend it on your plans and purposes? Jesus says give. Love others a great personal cost. Lay aside your claim to your own kingdom, and lay down your life that others might see the love of Jesus.

You can sum up these four examples with what Jesus says in v. 44: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Rather than getting even, lay down your rights and love them at great cost to self, pointing them to the kingdom of Jesus.

It’s easy to love people who love you in return. To be kind and helpful to those who are for you, or like you. In fact, so easy that Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” (vv. 46-47). To think of it in today’s terms, even the most violent street gang looks out for its own. What’s so noble about that?

But Jesus’ kingdom calls us to something more—a love that reflects the impartial love of the Father. Verses 44-45 tells us to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *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.” When Jesus talks about being a “son of your Father” here, he’s talking about looking like the Father, being known for what he’s known for, having a family resemblance. God does not restrict his love only to those children who obey him or love him in return. In his compassion he provides for all his creation. And so he calls us to a love that not only lays down our rights and gives sacrificially, but a love that does so even to those who seek to hurt us. A love that is unlimited in its scope, impartial, freely given to all, regardless of what they give us in return.

So what is it that makes this kind of love possible? It certainly doesn’t come naturally. In fact this love is impossible left to ourselves. This kind of self-giving love without limits only comes

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 100-101.

when we recognize and receive the self-giving love God has for us in Jesus Christ, and are willing to entrust justice to him.

The film *To End All Wars* highlights another character, Dusty Miller, who is set in stark contrast to Major Campbell, who sought justice, an eye for an eye. Dusty is a British POW who is decidedly Christian. His character is a portrait of meekness in the movie. The guards even permit him to build an outdoor chapel just outside the prison camp walls—that’s how much they trust him. While Campbell uses his influence to plot a bloody rebellion, Dusty uses his influence to teach and to demonstrate the self-giving love of the gospel, such that the prisoners, including Ernest Gordon (the author), despite being forced under horrific conditions to build the railway of death, choose to intentionally love their enemies, working so hard for them at constructing the railroad that they finish it six months ahead of schedule. The Japanese soldiers had no category for why they would do that. Where does that kind of love come from?

At one point Gordon asks Dusty that question: why he’s there, why he’s doing what he’s doing. Dusty tells him a story (again, a true story), how before the war he got into a fight at a pub, and paralyzed a man. But the man refused to press charges. He just forgave him, and Dusty couldn’t understand why. Then he told him: *he* had been forgiven a debt in his past. And he wanted to do the same for Dusty. He gave him his Bible, and told him his punishment was to read it. “Some punishment,” Dusty says.

When we come to realize the extent to which God loved us “while we were enemies” (Rom. 5:10), when we look into the face of our enemies and see ourselves, in our selfish rebellion against God, and realize and receive the mercy he has had on us in the cross—that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8)—it’s then when we’re free to love others with the very grace God has for us. To love our enemies, to go the second mile. As Ferguson summarizes, “Jesus’ point is clear: the Christian does the unexpected, because *grace makes him or her seek to win others by love* rather than retaliate on the basis of ‘rights.’”⁵ We respond not with an outrage based on our kingdom being attacked, but with the humility and love that follows the pattern of Christ, and trusts God in heaven to take care of justice.

Jesus doesn’t ask his followers to do anything he himself didn’t come to do. Listen to 1 Peter 2:21-25:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

We have been loved with a self-giving love even when we didn’t deserve it. This is the love of our Father. And Jesus says in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Now, whereas we will never arrive at perfection in this life—not until the Lord returns and completely removes sin from this world and remakes his new creation—we can, however, as we grow, reflect in increasing measures the perfect love of God. Again, Ferguson explains:

⁵ Ferguson, 101 (italics mine).

The mark of ‘perfection’ in the Christian is just this: his love is not determined by the loveliness of the attractiveness he finds in its object. His love is not conditional upon his being loved first. His love is not directed only towards those whose love he can rely on in return. No, his love is controlled by the knowledge that when he was God’s enemy and a sinner, the Father first loved him. If he is to show the Father’s love—the family love—then he will ‘go and do likewise’ (Lk. 10:37).⁶

How do you respond to personal offense? What does your response say about whose kingdom you’re serving? What is the price of being vindicated? Of being right? Of winning that argument? Winning that lawsuit? Here’s a simple question: who gains from this? Me or Jesus? Doesn’t mean that those two are always opposed. But if I stand to gain, and Jesus and his gospel stand to lose, then the direction we must take is clear, *though it may cost us everything*. But what does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul? Following Jesus as King means responding to personal offense with a self-giving love without limit.

⁶ Ferguson, 104.