

**Sermon Title: Be Perfect**  
**Biblical Text: Matthew 5:38-48**  
**Teaching Series: Kingdom Being**  
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## **Matthew 5:38-48**

*“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. “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.*

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We're continuing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We've been describing this three-chapter lesson as his interim vision for his followers; between his first coming and his return. He's teaching them and, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he's teaching us about the character, influence, and righteousness of his disciples. How we're

supposed to take up space and interact with the world. Thus far, I hope it's been clear ... Jesus' disciples are neither above society as holy judges. Nor are we enmeshed with the prevailing culture, living without distinction. Jesus says as his kingdom comes in subtly yet surely, we're blessed ... we're salt and light ... we live according to the heart, not simply the letter of the law. That's the nature of this kingdom being.

Embracing this kingdom being isn't about doing. First and foremost it's about healing. And so last week we considered just how Jesus is healing us, how he's making us whole. We learned that sin has separated our anger from our love, our bodies from our souls, and God from our lives. Through Jesus, what's fractured is made whole. That took us through v.37. Now, the final two pericopes in a list of six—focused on resisting retaliation and loving enemies—help us learn to love difficult people. You see, in our process of being made whole and in our mission to see the realities of heaven coming to earth, we will face opposition. Namely we have to learn to live with, what we'll simply call, difficult people who, like us, are not whole yet. It's inevitable. In family and work and community we'll meet people who drain our energy, hurt us, or even oppose the God we worship. And Jesus wants his disciples to learn to love them. That's what I'd like to talk about today. How to love difficult people.

Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- The *nature* of difficult people.
- The *response* to difficult people.
- The *hope* for difficult people.

[Prayer]

## **Movement 1: The Nature of Difficult People (vv. 39-42,44)**

We're going to bounce around these last two sections a bit. Because I think Jesus is getting at the same big idea in each passage. In each he talks about the *nature*, *response*, and *hope* we'll be discussing. And as in the previous four pericopes, Jesus compares what has been taught in the past with what he's teaching. He's reframing righteousness around the heart. He's not abolishing the law, he's fulfilling. Notice how he describes difficult people, or in his words *"the one who is evil."* Look at v.39. *Read Matthew 5:39-42 ... 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.* Amidst Jesus' instruction we get a sense for the nature of the opposition his disciples are facing. In other words, I think Jesus gives us a good sense of the *nature* of difficult people. Specifically we see four types of difficult people we meet in our personal relationships.

- First, difficult people harm us socially. *Jesus says someone may slap you on the face.* Now, calling an abuser a "difficult person" is certainly a grave understatement. We may prefer Jesus' language *"the one who is evil"* (we'll get to that in a bit). Whether we're talking about intimate partner violence, sexual assault, gun violence, or physical harm toward children we're talking about the most damaging and demeaning actions another human being can

inflict upon another. These are all-too common yet egregious acts of physical harm which should be dealt with biblically, but other passages of Scripture address those more directly (see Deuteronomy 22:25-27 and John 8:2-11). Though I'll try to give some guided in the next section. I don't think Jesus has such physical harm in mind when he speaks about a slap on the cheek. What Jesus mostly likely has in mind is an extreme act of cultural disrespect which would, culturally, warrant retaliation. For us that may be someone speaking ill of us online, speaking untruths or shaming us within our circle of friends, or being mean-spirited toward us when we see them. That's a difficult person.

- Second, difficult people oppress us legally. *Jesus says someone may sue you unjustly.* You see, few of Jesus' first followers had much money or many possessions. They likely had one loincloth, one tunic, one cloak, one head covering, and a pair of sandals. And so if they were being sued for their one tunic, which was a long shirt-like garment that went down to the knees, they would be taking the only one they had. This is not a fair proceeding, this is oppressive legal action against a friend. Perhaps you've had a friend take you to court or seek legal compensation for a misunderstanding or minor personal dispute. Or perhaps through divorce litigation, you were mistreated. That's a difficult person.
- Third, difficult people take advantage of us vocationally. *Jesus says someone may force you to work and not get paid.* Who among us has not been asked by a boss to do work which went above and beyond our position description, forcing us possibly to consider putting up a fight or perhaps losing our job. Jesus describes a third scenario in which someone is forced to walk a mile.

And that word "force" is particular. It's historic use was precisely used when civilians were forced to carry military baggage, not as volunteers nor hired workers. They were forced to work against their will and without a contract. That's a difficult person.

- Fourth, difficult people use us financially. *Jesus says someone may beg you for money.* Some difficult people constantly ask us for money. Perhaps not directly. Perhaps not every month. Perhaps not always in the same way. But one way or another, often through manipulation and claims of victimhood and nearly always in a state of emergency, Jesus describes a fourth scene in which someone constantly asks you for money. They often don't want friendship or relationship or to act like a mutually serving family member, rather they treat others like ATMs. They even see the wealthy or at the very least people who are better off than them, as obligated to help them financially. That's a difficult person.

Jesus adds a fifth aspect to the nature of difficult people in the next passage. Look at v.44. *Read Matthew 5:44 ... **But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*** On top of these other aspects of difficulty, Jesus explains that some people are challenging on the level of our spirit.

- So, fifth, difficult people attack us spiritually. *Jesus says someone may persecute you.* That word he uses means to pursue or hunt. Maybe within your family or circles of influence, someone doesn't simply disagree with your faith or perspective on life, they are openly hostile, dismissive, or belittling of God or the gospel or the Bible or you personally. They aren't curious seekers, but critical opponents. Jesus' first followers would come to

know all too well the devastation of suffering at the hand of spiritual oppression or persecution. That's a difficult person.

## **Movement 2: The Response to Difficult People**

### **(vv.38,43, Exodus 21:23-25, Ephesians 6:13, James 4:7)**

Psychologist Dan Allender explains how difficult people have an effect on us. My wife introduced me to Dr. Allender. He actually did a three-part podcast series on dealing with difficult people, reflecting on the Proverbs. He observes that difficult people drain us leading to *exhaustion*. They don't listen to us leading to *contempt*. And they envy us, which leads us to *confusion*. Difficult people make us tired, angry, and confused. And in the middle of all these complex emotions and experiences, Christians are to be thoughtful about how to respond to difficult people. But first, Jesus gives to two ways we're are not to respond to "the one who does evil" ... look at v.38. Read Matthew 5:38 ... **"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"** Once again, Jesus is using the 'you've heard it said' ... 'but I say to you' construct. In this case, Jesus highlights the law recorded in Exodus 21. **Read Exodus 21:23-25 ... But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.** In context, Moses is talking about corporate legal proceedings. In other words, he's not talking about personal relationships. And as before, in his sermon, Jesus is critiquing a common teaching. The religious leaders were teaching people that retaliation was permissible and right and good to retaliate when someone harms you; to harm them in kind. And, they even had a verse!

Now, *what's this law about and what's Jesus getting at?* Well, the original law was meant to curb the effects of evil. Pastor John Stott says it had **"the double effect of defining justice and restraining revenge"** (104). God wanted his people to know that there should be consequence and compensation for sin. But that those implications should be measured and equal to the offense. Meaning, if someone hurts someone their consequence should not be too light nor too severe. As the adage goes, *the punishment should fit the crime*. It's proper name is retributive justice. However, Jesus isn't talking about civil laws in his sermon. He's talking about personal relationships. He's talking about responding to difficult people. And so, the first way we should not respond to difficult people is by taking our pound of flesh. We should not seek revenge.

Secondly, Jesus says we shouldn't hate our enemies. Check out v.43. **Read Matthew 5:43 ... "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"** Unlike most of the previous, "you've heard it said" ... the instruction to hate our enemies is found nowhere in the Bible. It's a manipulation of Leviticus 19:18, which speaks the prevailing principle to loving your neighbor. That's why Jesus immediately corrects this thinking as directly as he can. We should not hate.

We should not seek revenge against difficult people.

We should not hate difficult people.

So, *what should we do? How do we respond to difficult people?* Well, Jesus shows us a number of ways but our general disposition toward them is summarized in two places. In v.39 Jesus says, **"Do not resist the one who is evil."** And in v.44 he says, **"Love your enemies."** That's a good place to being.

We should not resist them.

We should love them.

Now, this idea of resistance is nuanced. You see, elsewhere in the Bible we're instructed to resist evil and Satan, the evil one. Paul tells the Ephesians to **"take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day"** (6:13) ... and James encourages his readers to **"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"** (4:7). And so in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus can not possibly be telling us to let evil go unchecked, uncorrected, or unquestioned. He wants us to resist evil systematically and personally. He commands us to resist the Evil One, Satan by surrendering ourselves to the worship and care of the Lord. Rather, Jesus is commanding his disciples to not resist or retaliate against the difficult person.

In his memoir about the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. perfectly articulates this nuanced resistance. King understood that one could resist evil while not resisting the evil person. He explained that Nonviolent Resistance **"avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence in spirit. The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love"** (*Stride Toward Freedom*). This is what Jesus is getting at. Instead of seeking revenge or hating difficult people, we love them. But, we must of course ask ... *what in the world does that look like?* Let's walk back through the types of difficult people and see how Jesus invites us to apply love. I think we'll see a theme ...

- When someone is being socially difficult, Jesus says we should "turn to him the other cheek also" (v.39). Remember, this is not a command to allow physical abuse to persist. Rather we should allow a difficult to appear socially strong if they so desire, even if that means we appear socially weak. *Why?* Because our reputation is not our god. Not only so, but our aim is not to be great in society, it's to be great in the kingdom. We love them by not retaliating and by incarnating the gospel.
- When someone is being legally difficult, Jesus says we should "give them your cloak as well" (v.40). In other words, we should let them win. *Why?* Because our possessions are not our god. Therefore we can release what we own, even our most basic possessions in order to demonstrate love toward someone who is being difficult. In Jesus' example the one being taken to court is extremely poor and is literally being sued for the clothing on their backs.
- When someone is being vocationally difficult, Jesus says we should "go with him two miles" (v.41). Double the unfair request. We should go the extra mile. *Why?* Because our work is not our god. Being generous to our boss or supervisor or some other authority is more important than not having to doing more than we have to do.
- When someone is being financially difficult, Jesus says we should "Give to the one who begs" (v.42). When someone has a need or request, we should give them what they need. *Why?* Because our money is not our god. Therefore our impulse when someone has a need should be to help them, to give freely.

- When someone is being spiritually difficult, Jesus says "*pray for those who persecute you*" (v.44). When someone mistreats you because of your faith, you should demonstrated the power and beauty of your faith through prayer. *Why?* Because God is our God. To be sure this has a positive effect on your soul, causing you to grow in trust and humility. But prayer is also a kindness to the difficult person. Instead of return the injury, we pray for their good and their peace and their cosmic restoration.

In each of these cases, a theme of surrender exposes the difficult person. This is exactly what Dr. King was after. In responding to evil people with love, their folly, greed, and mistreatment is further revealed. Responding in love highlights the difficulty. The evil one is unmasked and the kingdom of God advances ... in your heart, in those around you, and potentially in theirs. Jesus is not condoning the behavior of a difficult person. Not in the slightest. Jesus is suggesting that love is more transformative than retaliation. That's Paul's teaching in Romans 12:21, "***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***" That's why Jesus says in praying for those who persecute us we show that we are sons of the Heavenly Father (see v.45).

But let's be honest ... even if your love does not bring changes to the difficult person or situation, we still choose love. In fact, Dr. Allender suggests in most cases the difficult person will continue to be difficult. In that case, we ought to set boundaries with difficult people.

- Moralistic thinking suggests we should always love and continue to give ourselves to needy people.

- Modern thinking suggests we should only do what is first and foremost caring for our own well-being.
- Gospel thinking understands while our command is to love, we all have limits.

Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus set boundaries with people. For the sake of time I'll simply offer the example at the start of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus walked away from the needy crowd (see v.1). He set a limit on his time with the crowd so he could give himself completely to his disciples. He said *no* to the crowd so he could say *yes* to his disciples. In the same way, it's healthy and wise to pay attention to the responses of difficult people to our love. If our overtures of refusing to retaliate render no change, their behaviors may lead to undue harm and even escalate to abuse. At some point we run out of cheeks, clothes, miles, and money. We are limited. Therefore redrawing the lines of our relationships are not only helpful but necessary. Author Henry Cloud, who wrote an important book on boundary setting back 1992 (which is now a five-part book series) ... he explains that *"Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom"* (31). Boundaries bring clarity. Boundaries demonstrate love for difficult people, bringing them clarity about where they end and we begin.

### **Movement 3: The Hope for Difficult People (vv.45-48, Isaiah 53:7)**

Jesus has detailed the ways people might be difficult. And he's been clear about how we're supposed to respond with love, resisting retaliation. Now he gives us the

hope for difficult people. *Read Matthew 5:45b-48 ... 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.* Jesus reminds us of our sonship and daughterhood. We are children of the Heavenly Father. In other words, our hope is based upon our identity in Christ, not the behavior of others. And our identity in Christ is grounded in God's character. So, *what's he like? How does he treat difficult people?*

Jesus draws our attention to what theologians call common grace. Common grace is the goodness, truth, and beauty of God which is given freely to all of his creation. The same sun shines, bringing life and gladness to the one who does evil and the one who does good. The same rain falls, nurturing the soil and rendering a fruitful harvest for the just and the unjust. God shows love to difficult people and he shows love to those called to love difficult people. That's really hopeful. *Do you know why? Because .... we can all be difficult people. Right? And so, isn't it good to know that the sun and rain are not a result of our moral purity but rather are a gift of God's goodness?* Jesus furthers the point through a series of rhetorical questions. He says, loving lovely people, that's easy. Everyone does that. Wishing well a well person, that's easy. Everyone does that. The common grace of God demonstrates an otherworldly kind of affection. It demonstrates that the type of love he is inviting his disciples to embody is the love they have received.

But our hope is even better than that. The hope God gives for difficult people goes well beyond the rain and the sun. A fuller view of the biblical narrative shows us

that Jesus is the one who is slapped. Jesus is the one who was stripped of his clothes. Jesus is the one forced to carry his cross for miles. Jesus is the one people begged for reward. Jesus is the persecuted one. Diane Langberg explains, "***The Crucified is the One most traumatized***" (*Suffering and the Heart of God*). Jesus knows the pain of difficult people. He knows the toll and toil of these relationships. On the cross he endures the worst effects of painful relationships. And yet, he does not retaliate. He does not seek revenge. He does not hate his enemies. The prophet Isaiah envisioned all this, generations before Jesus' death. ***Read Isaiah 53:7 ... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.*** Jesus does not resist the evil person. Jesus dies for the evil person. Jesus loves difficult people. Jesus died for difficult people. Like you. Like me. Like that difficult person in your life.

But God also sets limits. He sets cosmic boundaries within his family and outside his family. This is why Jesus concludes his teaching with an invitation to perfection. Or more precisely, wholeness. ***Read Matthew 5:48 ... You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*** That word *perfect* is the Greek word, *teleios* ... which means mature or complete. Jesus is saying *be whole*. And the only way we are made whole in our relationships is when our love is defined and grounded in the love of the Heavenly Father. When we love others the way we have been loved. When we see his love for us, cosmically difficult people, his love makes us whole.

- We turn our cheek when we experience Jesus' patience toward us.
- We give our cloaks when we know Jesus provides for all our needs.

- We go the extra mile when we remember Jesus crossed galaxies to be with us.
- We give away our money when Jesus is our treasure.
- We pray for our enemies when we hear Jesus intercede for us.

*Do you see?* This is our kingdom being. We don't imitate the world, retaliating and hating difficult people. Rather, we imitate our Heavenly Father. By the power of his Spirit, we follow the Son and love difficult people. People like us.