

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5:27-37

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 5:238-48- RADICAL LOVE (part 3)

Eye for Eye

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' [g]
39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Respond to those who wrong you with love not retaliation.

- The law of Moses gave the nation of Israel a guideline in matters of justice: "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Leviticus 24:20). It ensured that the penalty for crime was relative to the crime. This principle is still a good guideline for justice in courts of law today. But what about the personal arena? How do we personally respond when someone wrongs us? Does Moses' guideline for justice translate into the right for personal vengeance? Jesus emphatically says, "No".
- "Do not resist an evil person." What does Jesus mean by this? We need to remember that he is speaking to his disciples – not the courts of law. Romans 13:1-5 makes it clear that the state is given authority by God to implement justice. But Jesus makes the point that we are not permitted to take the law into our own hands. The implementation of justice belongs to the courts, and to God on Judgment Day, but not to us in our personal capacity.
- The word translated "resist" here, could also be translated as "revenge" or "retaliate". The phrase, "Do not resist an evil person," means that when someone personally wrongs us, we must not respond with hatred, bitterness, revenge or retaliation. Obviously this is radically counter-intuitive, which again reminds us of how desperately we need Christ's

transforming grace. Apart from the impact of Christ's grace, wisdom and leadership in our hearts, we are unable to respond in such a manner.

- Jesus then gives four mini-illustrations of how this principle of non-retaliation shapes our response to people who wrong us. The common denominator in all four illustrations is that instead of retaliating, the wronged person continues to love the wrongdoer. In each case, good overcomes evil.
- 1) "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." If someone badly insults you (that's what a slap to the cheek meant in those days, and still does today in many cultures), don't slap back. Rather, as a display of your deep security in God, and your love for the person, offer them your other cheek. This is your way of saying to the person, "Despite your painful insult, I want you to know that I am still secure in God, and I still love you, and I won't stop trusting God and loving you – no matter how much more you insult me." In this way love overcomes evil. Turning the other cheek is an act of cowardice, but of strength.
- 2) "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well." This refers to someone who falsely accuses you. By God's grace, instead of being bitter towards the person who sues you for your shirt, you continue to love the person – and even give them your coat. Again, love overcomes evil.
- 3) "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." In those days, a Roman soldier had the right to make any person carry his baggage for a mile. This was, of course, a form of exploitation. But Jesus calls us to love the one who has exploited us – and to offer to carry their baggage another mile. Again, love overcomes evil.
- 4) "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." No one likes to be accosted by demanding beggars. A common response is to retaliate by ignoring them and their demand. But Jesus urges us to love even the beggar who accosts us and makes demands on us.
- Jesus is not giving us four laws in these four illustrations. Rather he is illustrating a principle of overcoming evil with goodness and kindness. Indeed, there may be times when the loving thing to do is to exercise self-defence, or press charges against someone, or protest against being unjustly treated, or to say no to a demand. The point is that we act in genuine love toward those who hurt us, accuse us, exploit us or put us out. They may deal with us in an aggressive, even hateful manner, but we respond in the opposite spirit – in one of genuine mercy and love.
- Jesus is not advocating that we be "doormats". A doormat is someone who, through lack of confidence or fear, allows others to walk all over them. Instead, what Jesus is calling us to is confidence in God (as we trust him to watch over our case and cause) and love for people – qualities very different to that of a "doormat". In the words of Spurgeon, "There will be times that God allows our enemies to be a hammer, and us to be the anvil." That's a better picture: a resilient anvil rather than a fearful doormat. Jesus, in these verses, is warning against lack of love, not lack of courage.

- Jesus is not advocating that we never confront evil. In this teaching, Christ calls us to recognize evil in a person and to call it as such, while we still love the evil-doer. Looking at the life of Jesus, we learn that there are times to confront evil, and there are times to not confront evil. For example, when Jesus was slapped on the cheek while on trial, he protested the injustice of it, while still loving the wrong-doer (see John 18:22-23). And Paul confronted Peter for his wrongdoing, all the time acting in love (see Galatians 2:11-14). Jesus, in these verses, is warning against retaliation not confrontation.
- The apostle Paul comments on Jesus' teaching in Romans 12:14-21: "Bless those who persecute you ... do not repay anyone evil for evil ... do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink' ... do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Love for Enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor [h] and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children 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. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

Love those who don't love you.

- Leviticus 19:18 instructed the Israelites to love their neighbour. But Deuteronomy 7:1-5 taught them to seek the destruction of their neighbouring tribes. This is what Jesus means when he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy'."
- But the law of Moses was only a temporary law that guided the newly forming nation of Israel in its survival. Jesus makes it clear that to be his disciple is to go way beyond the teachings of Moses. We are to love our enemies. Who are our enemies? It is those who "cause us suffering, oppose us, block our way to achievement or fulfilment, who slander or criticize, or seek to get us into trouble, or are rude, vindictive, sarcastic, brutal or malicious, or who in rivalry want to take what is ours.' (Eaton, pg 102).
- Although all people, even the tax collectors and pagans (v46), are able to love those that love them, no one is naturally able to love those who hate or oppose them. Yet, Christ wants to so transform our hearts that we are able to love those who hate or oppose us. We are to genuinely love the unlovely and the unlovable.
- We demonstrate this love to them in numerous ways. We desperately long that they would repent of their sin, and be reconciled to God. We show them compassion, kindness, gentleness and humility. We refuse bitterness or insecurity to take root in our hearts. We do them good (see

Luke 6:32-33). But how are we to love them? Jesus tells us the secret. We go to the Father in prayer, and pray for them (v44). As we do this, the merciful and loving heart of God soaks into our hearts. It is in prayer for our enemies that we find the capacity to love them.

- The Father loves the whole world – both those who accept and those who reject his grace and love. Jesus illustrates this common love and grace of God by pointing to the sun and the rain, which come to all people, regardless of their standing with God (v45). As we love all people, especially our enemies and those who are not our “own people” (v47) we demonstrate the character of our Father – we’ll be privileged to be called sons and daughters of God because of the family likeness (v45). And God will reward us for representing him well to the world (v46).

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Seek to reflect God’s loving character completely.

- This verse summarizes the teaching of the entire Sermon on the Mount. In it Christ calls us to increasingly conform to the character of our Father. We are to “be perfect”. This means that we need to seek out ever-increasing levels of godliness and personal transformation. To “be perfect” does not mean “be faultlessly sinless” (which we will never fully attain in this life – see 1 John 1:7-9). Rather, it means to “be complete” or to “be mature”. It means to have all-round maturity, having every area of our life consistently and deeply, but not faultlessly, pleasing to God.
- The New Testament describes in some detail what it means to be perfect or mature. It means that we can distinguish God’s will for our lives (Hebrews 5:14), endure in trial (James 1:2), control our tongue (James 3:2), cast out fear (1 John 4:18), be greatly generous at God’s instruction (Matthew 19:21), be highly receptive to the Spirit’s ministry (1 Corinthians 2:6) and completely reflect God’s perfectly loving character (Matthew 5:48).