

## Matthew 5:38-48

Epiphany 7, Feb. 20, 2022  
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*"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.<sup>41</sup>*

*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.<sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?<sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Ordinarily, little children want to be just like their parents. Little girls may clomp about in mommy's high heels. Little boys like to walk around in daddy's baseball cap. You ask a child what they want to do when they grow up, and it's not uncommon for them to say whatever it is their parents do for work. And it feels good, as a parent, to see your children look up to you like that, striving to be just like you.

We do know, however, that as they grow older, they start to become their own people. They discover their own interests, which may or may not be similar to their parents' interests. They find their own career paths, which are most often unrelated to what their parents do for work. But there are some ways that children tend to follow in their parents' footsteps throughout their lives, and that's in regard to character and characteristics. For better or worse, children see the things their parents do, listen to how they treat people, witness how their parents react in stressful situations—and that usually will determine the character of that child throughout their lives.

That can be scary for us parents. Knowing our own weaknesses and flaws, the fits of anger and rage, our lack of self-control—the thought that our children see those things and subconsciously adopt them as their own—it's scary to even think about. Well, God is calling our attention to *this* type of parent/child relationship in our text today as He speaks to us. But here He's not speaking to us as parents; rather, He's speaking to us as children. Specifically, *His* children. As Children of God, how will you act? How will you emulate your Father in heaven? That's the focus of our sermon today as we consider the theme: **Like Father, Like Children.**

Near the conclusion of today's text, after Jesus calls upon us to be loving and merciful and generous and forgiving just as God is loving and merciful and generous and forgiving, He says that we ought to do this so ***"that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."*** **Like Father, like children.**

The challenge in this, is that when Jesus describes the characteristics of a Christian life—those things which He wants us to emulate—none of it comes naturally to us. In fact, everything He describes here is contrary to our human nature. For instance, much of what Jesus is describing here is all about the idea of retribution. What will you do when someone wrongs you?

We don't have to think very hard at all to know how we respond to perceived wrongs. We all have sought out personal vengeance, always crying out "Me first." We know the thoughts: *"Come on, don't let them talk to you that way. They have no right."* *"Come on, you did all the work. Now your coworker is stealing the credit. YOU deserve to be recognized."* The truth is, how we want to respond in these types of situations is one thing, and how Jesus is instructing us to respond as Children of God is totally opposite.

Now, what Jesus taught in today's text was directly related to the teachings of the religious leaders of the day. Six times within the surrounding context Jesus corrected the shallow religious interpretations of these religious leaders. Each of these corrections began with the phrase, **"You have heard that it was said..."** and then Jesus would add, **"but I say to you."** Jesus was contrasting God's will with the teachings of the Pharisees who had perverted the law of God and twisted it so that they'd be able to convince themselves that they alone were keeping it.

That's exactly what Jesus is doing today in our text, then. So, in verse 38, Jesus said, **"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"** These are words which are very familiar to us. Commentators and historians refer to them as the 'law of retribution.' And these words are actually found in Scripture as God's Law to the people! For instance, in Deuteronomy, God instructs His people: **"Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."** (Deuteronomy 19:21) Now, if we just take that passage in isolation and out-of-context, we might think that God is teaching us that we should retaliate against any wrongdoing.

However, in the context it's clear that this law was not given to individual Israelites as a guideline for private justice. It was given to Israelite judges for civil justice, in particular, to ensure that the person wronged received justice, and that the wrongdoer would receive a proper sentence—in other words, what we often refer to as "the punishment fitting the crime."

But by the time of Jesus, however, the religious leaders had taken a law meant only for judges and had started to apply it to individuals, giving private citizens license to seek personal revenge. This is what Jesus was objecting to in our text. How did He respond? Verses 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. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."**

These are challenging words, aren't they? Over time, they've been the subject of much theological debate. And so, it's important for us this morning to understand what Jesus IS saying here and what He is NOT saying. Jesus is not telling us to ignore evil. However, He is telling us that, as God's children, we are not to seek that personal retaliation which the Pharisees promoted—not to extract an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth on our own. Instead, we are to display a generous, forgiving spirit like that of our Father in heaven. We are to leave punishment to the proper authorities and vengeance to the Lord.

But it's equally clear that Jesus is not telling us to stand still while someone beats us senseless, nor to give others everything we own to the detriment of our own family. We have responsibilities to them too. The examples here in our text were given about 2000 years ago, so we can probably recognize that there might be some common understanding of His initial audience that we might be missing. So, let's look at these directives from our Savior a little more closely.

Jesus says, **"if someone strikes you on the RIGHT cheek, turn to him the other also."** If I'm right-handed and I strike you on your right cheek, in all likelihood I slapped you with the back of my right hand. There's an ancient collection of Jewish laws called the Mishna, well known at Jesus' time, which stated that if you struck someone with an open palm, you had to pay a certain amount to the individual. But if you struck someone with the back of the palm, you had to pay twice the amount. So according to the law of the day, if you were struck in this way, you were able to get immediate, double retribution. Notice then, how Jesus' words turn this policy on its head. Instead, **"Turn the other cheek."** Jesus says, you ought to be ready to suffer a new indignity rather than avenge an old one. And boy, is that tough

to do. But the ultimate question is this: As Children of God, are we willing to tarnish our Father's reputation by striking back when we suffer a blow to our pride? The answer ought to be no.

Or let's consider the next example, ***"If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."*** The Greek word translated here as tunic was the undergarment worn next to the skin. The word translated as cloak, referred to the long outer-garment that served as a coat. The Mosaic Law actually prohibited the taking of the cloak/outer-garment because many poor people used it for bedding and warmth at night. This being the case, a person would be under no legal obligation to give up his cloak if he were sued for his clothes, it would be his right to keep it. And yet Jesus says, "Give it away."

So, what's the point? Is Jesus telling us to give away everything we own, the very clothes on our backs, all of our financial resources—which would then be the thrust of verse 42, ***"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you"***? No, not really. He's not telling you to go around giving away everything you own. Rather, the lesson is very much the same as in the first example—be generous, give more than demanded. Doesn't our heavenly Father do the same? Isn't this then the type of life He desires His children to emulate? **Like Father, Like Children?**

And this is clearly the thought of the next example Jesus used in verse 41, ***"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."*** Now, I don't know that I can think of a time when someone forced me to go a mile with them, maybe when I ran cross country, and the coach told me to run however many miles, but I can't think of any other time where I could relate to this idea. So again, we have to understand the context: at the time of Jesus, the powerful Roman army occupied Israel. By law, Roman soldiers had the right to press any able-bodied Israelite into limited service; that is, to provide the soldier with nourishment or carry his pack for exactly one Roman mile. Remember how Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Christ's cross by the Roman soldiers, and He didn't really have any say in the matter? By law, you could be forced by Roman soldiers to walk a literal mile.

It was in this historical context during which Jesus was teaching. It doesn't take too much imagination to understand how any self-respecting Israelite, who detested the idolatrous, occupying Romans, would have been muttering under their breath every step of that Roman mile. *"Rotten Romans. Think they can do whatever they want. Think I have nothing better to do that carry this pack under a hot sun. Well, they'll get theirs. Oh yeah. One day they'll get what they've got coming."* But Jesus says, even if you're only obligated to walk one mile, walk two instead. That literally means, "Go the extra mile"; a phrase which still means today what Jesus meant when He spoke it: do more than required; display generosity.

Finally, this is really the thrust of the remaining verses of our text as well. Verses 43-48, which I'll read again, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> 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. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***

Dear friends in Christ, it is impossible to study a text like this one without being absolutely humbled when we see how *daily* we fail in all of these ways. It's impossible to read this without realizing how far short we've fallen of God's demand, ***"You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*** And so, we can respond to this realization in one of two ways, either as we naturally want to as sinful humans

or as Children of God do. Remember, what I said about the Pharisees and how they took the law and then twisted it in such a way so that they could be the ones who fulfilled it? That's the natural human response. Let's avoid doing the same. If we were to read this text, and then use it as an outline for daily legalism, and start handing our coats to people, and walking two miles—and not a step further—well, then we might easily be stumbling into the same conclusion as the Pharisees. That “so long as I do these things, that will be enough for my Father in heaven.”

It would never be enough. As we see our failures to truly forgive, our failures to be generous, our failures to let go of bitterness, the best thing we can do is not to simply try harder next time. Rather, let's respond like Children of God. Let's take these failings to the cross of the One who has followed through on all of it. In this matter of **“Like Father, Like Children,”** the greatest example we have is the Son of God Himself.

The Apostle Peter wrote in his First Epistle: ***“But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ 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.”*** (1 Peter 2:20-23)

Jesus Christ is the Savior who loved us, though by nature we were His enemies. And though we might conceive in our minds an idea that God might one day seek retribution from us, especially when we see all the ways we've sinned against Him, *He* is the one who endured the punishment required. There is no more retribution to be demanded, there is no more that must be paid. For Jesus is the Savior who prayed, “Father, forgive them” for a world that crucified Him. And He is the Savior who not only walked the extra mile but walked the road all the way to the cross, understanding what that cross would bring. Seeing our loving God who has done all of this and more for sinners like us, that is where we find the strength and the desire to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and walk the extra mile.

Think about the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant owed his master 10,000 talents of silver, an unbelievable amount of money, and when he couldn't pay it back, the master said he'd just write off the whole debt. That's just what our Heavenly Father did for you, He forgave your debt of sin, for Jesus' sake. You don't have to pay for them—you couldn't even if you wanted to—Jesus already has. Sadly, in that parable, the servant soon forgot the joy he felt when his master forgave him that huge debt. What ended up happening was he refused to forgive his fellow-servant a relatively small debt, and that angered his master greatly. The servant was thrown back into prison. Let's not be like that servant. Instead of forgetting, let's always remember how the Lord has had mercy on us, calling us when we did not seek him, finding peace with us when we contributed only hostility, dying for us when we were only His enemies. That's your Heavenly Father is like. Remember that!

And to this same heavenly Father, let's entrust all of our sinful failings, knowing that He is merciful and promises to forgive us. And also, when we have enemies, when we're not at peace and when hurt and injustice haunts us, let's take those things to our Father as well and trust God will take care of it. Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, that's not up to us. What we have been given is the status as Children of God. So may God give each of us the strength and the faith to follow Him in this matter of **Like Father, Like Children**, until that day when He calls each of us His children to His side in heaven. In His name, Amen. ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.