

*Basic Training: Perfect Love*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Proverbs 25:21-22; Romans 12:9-14; Matthew 5:38-48*

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 5:38-48. Let's listen to God's Word together. "[Jesus taught,] 'You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. 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, 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. 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? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'"

How much is revenge a part of our culture? It's in lots of entertainment, even things geared to youngsters. The superhero movies that have taken over the box office were summed up by Mad Magazine in **Superman** parody 30 years ago: "good triumphs over evil, if good is more violent than evil." Revenge thrillers are their own subgenre, but I can't find a genre for movies on forgiveness. *Revenge* is one of ABC's top-rated shows, not one called "Compassion."

We still need to learn from the Sermon on the Mount. This part of the sermon has been misunderstood and misinterpreted at times, but Jesus sets a standard of forgiveness and love far beyond human measure. It is no wonder this part of the sermon ends with a call to "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." He's asking to move beyond our own capacity to forgive.

Let's start with his quote: "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth." That is a direct biblical quote; there's no additions. And you know what? It was a good, God-given law. Unlike other law codes in the ancient Near East, it limited punishment to what was taken. It stopped revenge. American law today rarely stops at this level. Usually, we demand far more from someone who commits a crime than what they took from others or from society. We take their freedom away for years in addition to massive fines. I'm not condemning it; I'm saying the biblical standard did not leave room for vengeance beyond the crime. It was a good law.

But Jesus doesn't give us the right to demand our due. Each of Jesus' examples is about extracting vengeance for being wronged. Turning the other cheek isn't a call for total nonviolence. The Bible says that God establishes nations to protect the innocent and to stop wrongdoers. Jesus is not saying to take abuse lying down. Being struck on the right cheek came from a backhanded slap, the ultimate insult in Jewish society. It invited hostility and aggression; you could even be taken to the Sanhedrin and tried for doing it. Jesus said, "Turn your cheek." Don't make things worse by getting even. When Jesus and Paul were slapped, both of them spoke out against the injustice of it. They didn't let evil people off the hook for their actions. But they both gave grace rather than demanding their due.

“If someone wants to sue you for your tunic, give them your cloak as well.” The tunic was an inner garment, but the cloak was an outer garment. Jewish law said no one could force someone to give up their cloak because people used them as bed coverings too. Jesus says, “Don’t return cruelty for cruelty. Give them more than what they want to take from you.”

“If someone forces you to go with them one mile, go with them two.” Roman soldiers could legally force someone to carry their equipment a mile. The Jews despised their occupiers and would never willingly offer them their services. To go two miles was an unheard-of kindness even in areas friendly to the Romans. Jesus isn’t just saying to go the extra mile. He’s saying, “Go the extra mile for the person who’s hostile to you and your beliefs.”

“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” The disciples didn’t bankrupt themselves giving and lending to everyone. Paul taught that someone shouldn’t be given food if they were able-bodied but unwilling to work. But they all agreed it was better to be defrauded than to make a mockery of Jesus’ teaching. In Luke 6, Jesus teaches to lend to our enemies expecting nothing in return. Jesus isn’t worried about the exceptions because we want to live by the exceptions. We want to believe that everyone is out to take us and we have little to give, so we give to few and lend to none. Jesus doesn’t deny that we’ll be taken; He says to give anyway. Be generous with your love and your goods.

Jesus then gives a twisted quote: “love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” The first half is biblical, but the second half isn’t. But that’s how people acted, and still do. Take care of your own people, your own family, your own tribe, and forget everybody else. The Jewish people in Jesus’ day were called “haters of humanity” by the Romans because they had such a severe dislike of anyone who wasn’t Jewish. They lived out this unbiblical proverb.

Jesus doesn’t call for grudging acceptance. He says, “Love your enemies.” The word love here is *agape*: overwhelming, self-giving, self-sacrificing love. “Pray for them,” Jesus says. Lift them up before the Father. Ask for their well-being and favor. Ask for the turning of their hearts toward God. Being God’s children, Jesus says, means interceding for people who dislike you and what you stand for. God shows kindness to those who hate Him; we are to be like Him.

There isn’t any reward in loving the loveable and favoring your family and friends, Jesus says. Everybody does that. If the lowest of the low is warm to the people who care about them, how is that special when you do it? God wants us to welcome the person who isn’t like us, who doesn’t think or talk like us, who isn’t sure what they think about God, who may be argumentative or post mean things about other people online, who may just not like us very much. We show grace to the person who least deserves it.

That’s perfection. That’s what we’re called to. God showed His perfect love by paying every penalty through Christ on our behalf so that we might come to Him. He has made His family, Christian believers throughout the world, out of rebellious, wicked, sinful people that He showed extraordinary kindness to. Do that, Jesus says. Be like God.

As we've discussed in the past weeks, we aren't perfect. Christ came to teach us that we are unable to save ourselves, and He came to provide the salvation we so desperately need. When we're confronted with, "Be perfect," we realize our failure and our need for salvation. We've discussed that, and I don't want to belabor the point. Most of you have been here for a sermon where I've talked about it. You know you need to give your life over to Jesus.

I want to focus on something different. "Be perfect." Sounds impossible. As we are now, it is. Sin has broken us; perfection is not a possibility. Or is it? You see, God expects perfection from us. He doesn't expect us to *be* Him; no matter whatever happens to us, we will not be God. But He says we are to be perfect like Him, whole and complete, without flaw.

Here's the thing: what God expects of His people, He will make a reality. We will not be made perfect in this lifetime, but we will be made perfect. In eternity, God will finish the process He has already started in this life of making us whole and complete. We will become the people God intended us to be. We will be free from sin. We will be whole, not broken. God does not ask the impossible. By asking for perfection, He promises He will make it happen.

That's a huge relief, blessing, and depression-lifter. I don't know about you, but I say and think and do things every day that I later regret. I give in to sleep, to temptation, to all sorts of things, and I am really striving to be more godly! Those things can leave us depressed. In Romans 7, Paul says the exact same thing about himself and comments, "What a wretched man I am!" But Paul goes on to say, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That's the joy. I look forward to the day in eternity when I am truly kind and thoughtful in everything, where I treat everyone with respect and love, when I do not step away from God into sin because of some desire that shouldn't be there. We strive for those things now, but we can look forward to the day when we are made perfect!

Because God will perfect believers, we don't live in fear of condemnation. As we wait for perfection, we obey and become more like Him. How do we obey what Jesus is talking about in this passage? I've got a few quick thoughts for us. First, *let's re-think our enemies*. Many people say, "I don't have any enemies." What that means for most of us is that nobody is out to get us. Some people don't like us much but there's no threat of harm from them. While there are crazy people out there who hate Christians and harm believers in faraway lands, the chance of coming into contact with them is virtually nil. In that sense, we have very few enemies.

But more people qualify if we think in the same way the people who heard Jesus did. Because we're called to love them, that's actually OK. The Jews considered anyone who wasn't of the faith an enemy. Sounds harsh, but here's something to think about. We may have many friends who are enemies of God. They aren't nasty people. It's that, because they do not believe in God or trust in God to save them, they have chosen to be on the opposite side. Nice people, decent people who pay their taxes and try not to hurt anybody who don't acknowledge their need for God count. They may even belong to a church, but they haven't genuinely come to faith, trusted in Christ for salvation, and begun to follow Him. Under Jesus' definition, they qualify as enemies...passively, for the most part, but they have sided against God.

Jesus' definition of enemies might add more people to the list. How many of us work or have worked with co-workers who slack off and expect us to cover for them, forcing us to go the first mile, if you will? Who at work or school or the gym or even people we think of as friends are insulting and unkind? Who use us and take from us without giving back? God calls enemies people like that, and we are to love them. Sometimes, we'd rather return evil for evil; we wish we could turn the tables on that bad boss or the slacking co-worker or the guy who is angry about everything in the lunch room that ruins your day. But God says to show them grace.

Something that convicted me this week is that we treat even our best friends like enemies if we don't attempt to introduce them to Christ. We have parents, children, relatives, and close friends we love, but if we are unconcerned about their spiritual lives, we are treating them like enemies! Do we actually love somebody if we don't care where they are going to spend eternity? If believing in Christ is the only way to be saved, and we don't at least invite them to church to meet Him, what kind of friends are we? We either don't believe that God will condemn those who refuse to come to Him, or we're afraid of what they might think of us, or we don't want to offend anyone, but we've not loved them if we've ignored their spiritual needs.

I am not somebody who goes out into the community and sees a bunch of lost people that I am compelled to tell about Jesus. But I have a growing sense that, at very least, I should introduce Jesus to the folks I know. God has put them in my path for a reason. I can't consider myself their friend if I haven't tried to make Jesus known to them. I encourage you to start thinking in the same way.

Second thought is this: *let's re-think how we love our friends and our enemies.* Jesus doesn't just advise against retaliation. He asks us to give far more than what's asked of us to those who are against us! Let him slap the other cheek! Give both your garments! Go the second mile! This kind of amazing love makes Christians stand out. When we give our best to those who deserve it least, we show the compassion God showed us in sending Jesus to save us.

When was the last time you showed extravagant love to a friend, let alone an enemy? When you do, it stands out. This week, a good friend gave us a gift card that was more than what they could afford – it was a sacrifice for them to make it happen. It touched Catha's and my heart. It made us thankful. If that's how we feel when a friend does it for us, imagine what it's like when an unbeliever receives an unexpected and generous gift from a Christian simply because we want to show them God's love.

When did you last pray for a friend or an enemy? We pray for the sick. But how often do our prayers go beyond that? How about praying for the salvation of our families and friends? For the children in our church to grow in love and joy and peace and patience? That God would lead more people into our path that we could introduce to Him? If Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies, we need to start by praying for our friends, regularly, fervently, and not just for physical healing. Praying only for physical healing is like owning a million dollar sports car and never getting it out of first gear! We have the power of God behind us, power that makes the world's best sports car look like a Hot Wheels toy in a Happy Meal. We can pray for so much more! And we can pray for our enemies that they would repent, that they would change their minds and turn toward God and find wholeness in Him.

This is difficult. It is hard to make time to pray regularly. Sometimes we wonder if our prayers make any difference. But Scripture says that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective. They are heard by God and answered; they turn hearts toward Him; they turn animosity into friendship; they make enemies into close companions. Let's try it. On Saturday April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the night before Easter, we'll meet at our regular time for an Easter vigil. We'll sing, read Scriptures together, and we'll pray - for CrossWay, for God to move in a mighty way in our community, for the motivation to pray more, that we might become prayer warriors whose prayers are heard and answered in amazing ways.

One of my favorite movies is *The Remains of the Day*. It's a little like *Downton Abbey*. It's about a head butler and his relationship with the housekeeper of a grand old English home in the 1930s. They're a perfect match. The problem is, neither of them can lower their dignity to say the words that would bring them together. It's not spoiling much to say they miss out on something incredible because they refuse to ask. What will we miss out on, in our own relationship with God and our relationships with others, if we refuse to come to God and ask? He's already proven His love for us; all He is waiting on is our response, our cry out to Him. Let's not neglect that important part of what Jesus teaches.

As we're praying, as we're drawing close to the Father and asking for changed hearts and minds and lives, *let's re-think making friends and enemies*. I am a homebody. A lot of us are. Detroiters retreat into their homes. They are our castles. It is rare to be invited into someone's home, especially someone you don't know well. Most friendships come through social networks established a long time ago, through work or church or school ties. So few people move to Detroit, we assume that everyone has friends already. We aren't looking to make more, especially because the media teaches us to live in fear. We don't know people who would take advantage of us in the ways Jesus mentioned because we live self-contained lives.

You don't need to *know* virtually anybody to live in a city like ours. You can buy almost everything online if you want to. You don't like your plumber or your mechanic or your waitress or your church? There are several dozen more to choose from, and you never have to interact with the old one again. We are very seldom stuck with people – maybe an annoying neighbor or a bad school district, but even those things can change with enough effort and desire.

What would it mean for us to deliberately begin cultivating relationships with people we don't know well or people we'd like to know better? Maybe it's through building relationships at your favorite restaurant or joining a hobby club. It will look different for each one of us. But being intentional about relationships opens us up to God's possibilities. We might get hurt or used – Jesus says as much. But there's also the possibility for friendships that will extend past this life into the next, friendships that will grow as our new friends come to know and love Christ through our influence on their lives.

At CrossWay, you've already had experience being a part of intentional and deliberate relationship-building. You've chosen to be here on Saturday nights to be with friends you've cultivated and to worship with this group. Those of us here now know what it's like to give some things up in order to worship together. By your willingness to sacrifice certain comforts and parties and what-not, you've grown in your ability to deliberately build relationships.

This is a growing edge for me. I am a shy person by nature; I do not naturally gravitate to people I don't know. But I want to learn, and I encourage us all to learn together. Putting ourselves out there, willing to make friends (and enemies!) is tough. But Jesus' words tonight speak to us of our need to be in relationships, even those we wouldn't necessarily choose for ourselves, relationships with people who are different from us and may take advantage of us. Let's pledge together to re-think our relationships and how God might be using them to build His Kingdom. May God work within us that we would be willing to let go of our fears and step out so that others might know the wonderful love we have been shown through Jesus and His sacrifice for us. If God can make even our worst enemy our friend, if He can show perfect love through His Son to us, we can follow in His steps and trust Him in the midst of our relationships.