

November 14, 2021

“Loving Unconditionally”
Lesson 3 of Unit

Matthew 5:38-48

Intro

Today’s study passage is one of Jesus’ most difficult teachings. What He says is unnatural to us, even seeming impossible to carry out. He asks us to love those who are difficult, who are hurting and persecuting us.

These verses continue Jesus’ teachings on what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, with the understanding that if we are to truly be people of the kingdom, we need to be following His Kingdom principles more and more. Unlike the Jews of Jesus’ time, God is not going to establish His kingdom with a sword. It’s going to happen with Jesus’ death on the cross, then his resurrection. God had grace on us when we were His enemies; He calls us to deal in grace with our enemies.

Read Matthew 5:38-48

1. vs. 38: Jesus begins with “You have heard it said...”

He is referring to how this Biblical Law was being taught

This law is in Ex. 21:24, Lev. 24:20, and Deut. 19:21

The law’s meaning is that the punishment should fit the crime

It came to be taught as a law of authority to take personal revenge for a wrong done

Jesus’ audience would have liked to get revenge on Rome for their brutality

Jesus doesn’t disagree with the Law; he takes issue with people’s abuse of the law

2. vs. 39: He tells his audience “Do not resist an evil person”

The Romans were violent to Israel; the logical response is to violent back

Jesus says God’s kingdom doesn’t come through violence / armed force

This has nothing to do with self-defense

This verse is responding to taking revenge

Jesus was struck in Matthew 26, but didn’t strike back

He modeled what He had taught in Matthew 5

He brings the kingdom into the world by submitting to abuse

“Turning the other cheek” is trusting that God will protect us

3. vs. 40: The next two verses develop the same idea as vs. 38-39, but with different situations

The first here is about someone taking another to court

The item in question is a tunic, a garment worn next to the skin in Jesus’ time

People then usually only had one set of clothes; this tunic is a valuable possession

Jesus says don’t protect the inner garment; give it away along with the outer cloak

This is the opposite of what most of us would feel like doing

We can take this action because we know that God provides for us

We can have especial confidence if we are following kingdom practices

This verse is not saying give anything to anyone who asks
The context is a court case—the possession of an item is being disputed
The teaching here is toward radical selflessness, radical generosity
We give rather than hoard

4. vs. 41: The third situation Jesus develops is about compelled actions

Roman soldiers could require/force a citizen to carry their gear as they marched
Some sources suggest that the maximum limit was a one-mile carry
Most people would resent being forced to carry the gear for that one mile
Jesus says voluntarily carry it another mile
The message being developed in vs. 38-41 is the same
God's kingdom doesn't come by resisting via force
It comes through a heartfelt generosity
God has been generous to us in our rebellion
We must show a similar generosity to those we call "enemies"

5. vs. 42: This verse summarizes the ideas Jesus has been developing in this section

In Jesus' day, people might ask for emergency help to be able to eat
That's the context background that informs what this verse is referring to

Any person's desperate circumstances aren't the real point here
It's not solely about what another needs—
It's about the generosity of spirit in each person belonging to the Kingdom
As the song lyric says,
"Freely, freely, you have received
Freely, freely give."

6. vs. 43: This verse sets up the same way as vs. 38

"You have heard it said..."
Jesus is contrasting what the OT law says vs. an idea about it which is being taught as
equal to the law
There is an OT law to "love your neighbor"—Lev. 19:18
There is no OT law that teaches us to "hate your enemy"
It's natural to hate one's enemies
The error comes in assuming that the people we hate are also enemies of God
That is not always the case
For the Jews in Jesus' time, it was natural to hate the Romans
Jesus instructs God's people to do something very different from hating their enemies
Just like the examples He used in vs. 39-41

7. vs. 44: And the follow-up to "You have heard it said..." is "But I say..."

Jesus says to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"
This is not a typical human response!
What Jesus is calling His followers to do is the opposite of "common sense"
This is the correct response for people who know what God had done for them
Also, there are OT scriptures about showing a kind response to an enemy

Ex. 23:4, Prov. 25:21

Those instructions haven't been taught as much as "hate your enemy"
Jesus is correcting teaching to reflect what God's view is

8. vs. 45: Here's the reason why we are to love our enemies

"...that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

If we love our enemies, act like Jesus asks, we are behaving like children of God

We might think it's OK to hate someone because God also hates them

What are we to do if God treats His enemies with kindness and grace?

The second half of this verse reminds us that is exactly what God does.

"He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Nature's blessings aren't given to "good" people only

God provides for all, whether they obey Him or not

God is a God of grace, giving people (like us!) better than they deserve

If we belong to Him, if we're part of His family, we show it by the way we treat
our enemies

God said there is a blessing on those who are peacemakers (Matt. 5:9)

9. vs. 46: Jesus uses vs. 46 and 47 to further explain why we need to love our enemies if we love God

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?"

Loving those who love you isn't anything exceptional

Tax collectors were thought to be the furthest from God, the lowest of the low

They were seen as those who had "sold out" to the Romans to make money

They bid for the right to collect taxes—

They got to keep whatever was above their bid price

They were despised during Jesus' day

If someone seen as so far from God knows how to love those who love him, then there is
no sign of godliness in that kind of action

10. vs. 47: Greetings in public in Jesus' world were important

People were known to be accepted or excluded by whether or not they were greeted

A friend was greeted, an enemy was not

Jesus points out that greeting only your brothers doesn't show godliness

In fact, it shows a lack of godliness

God doesn't exclude anyone from coming to Him

Therefore, we shouldn't have "in-groups" of those who are "acceptable" either

11. vs. 48: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Sounds like a tall order, nearly impossible

Perfect???

He’s asking His followers to compare our behaviors to God’s standard, and not man’s

The complete, unfailing love of God himself

Only by looking to God’s love can we see what our behavior toward others is to be like

We know we aren’t perfect, and unfortunately, can never be while on this Earth

We constantly rely on the continual grace and forgiveness of a perfect God

This in turn reminds us to treat others as God has treated us

Application: This passage has been a long reminder that we are prone to put others in a “less than me” category. They aren’t my friends, they’re my enemies. If they do something to me, I’ll get them back for it. If someone makes something hard for me, I won’t go along with them. I only talk to those who are like me, who are my close friends. Does any of this sound familiar? It unfortunately sounds all too familiar to some thoughts that go through my head.

The truth is, we are all hard to love. But God, who knows how unlovable we are better than anyone else, has loved us. His love transforms us to learn to love others in the same way He loved us, even those who are hurt us most deeply—our enemies.

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Prayer: Father God, forgive us our hard hearts toward those that we find difficult to get along with, let alone love. Strengthen our love for others so that they will see You in our words and actions. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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