

WEEK 6: TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

PART 3: RETALIATION AND LOVE

Matthew 5:38–48



The Place of the Passage

The introduction to the Sermon on the Mount showed Jesus' agenda: he is unfolding a countercultural vision of the good life. This is the flourishing life of his kingdom, in which we experience true happiness. He concluded this introduction by affirming that the people of his kingdom are the salt and light of the world. Jesus introduced the next section by affirming that he came not to abolish the Old Testament but to fulfill it. He now demonstrates this by showing how he fulfills the Old Testament in relation to six ethical expectations. The first four have addressed laws about murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths. This section now continues Jesus' explanation with the examples of retaliation and love. In each case we see how Jesus fulfills the law and how we are to live as his disciples in his countercultural kingdom.

The Big Picture

Jesus contrasts what people have heard about retaliation and how to treat enemies with the new standards of his kingdom.

Reflection and Discussion

Carefully and thoughtfully read this section of Jesus' teaching, Matthew 5:38–48. Then use the provided questions to help you think more deeply about the text. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 1830–1831; online at www.esv.org.)

Instruction about Retaliation (Matt. 5:38–42)

Jesus in Matthew 5:38 draws on Old Testament teaching about judicial retribution. Read the following texts and summarize their teaching on this topic: Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19–20; Deuteronomy 19:21.

Some think that the Old Testament's teaching on judicial retribution encouraged revenge. However, in a world filled with a back-and-forth escalation of vengeful retaliation, how would the Old Testament laws actually limit and neutralize such feuds?

The Old Testament law rightly valued neutralizing feuds by enforcing judicial retribution. How does Jesus' radical teaching in Matthew 5:40–42 go beyond neutralizing hostilities?

Jesus offers four examples in Matthew 5:39–41 of how his teaching on non-retaliation is not an abrogation of the law but a fulfillment of it. His point is not that we must follow these examples in a literalistic, unwise fashion but that we must apply their wisdom to our own circumstances. How would you summarize the main point of these examples? What are a few examples you can think of for how to apply this main point today?

Instruction about Love (Matt. 5:43–47)

The commandment to love one's neighbor echoes Old Testament law (Lev. 19:18); the additional command to "hate your enemy" is an oral tradition that was introduced in Jesus' day and likely came from a misunderstanding and misappropriation of examples in the Old Testament about enemies of God and Israel. How does Jesus not only correct this misunderstanding but point to a deeper and more expansive understanding of what it means to love (Matt. 5:43–44)?

How does God the Father exemplify blessing those who are evil (Matt. 5:45)? What does this teach us about God's character?

As you consider how to apply Matthew 5:43-47 to your life, for whom do you need to start praying, and how can you concretely bless him or her?

Handwriting lines for reflection on applying Matthew 5:43-47.

This focus on love summarizes fittingly everything Jesus has taught so far. What similarities do you see between Jesus' teaching on love in Matthew 5:43-45 and in the opening sections of the sermon (vv. 3-16)?

Handwriting lines for reflection on similarities between Jesus' teaching on love.

Summary of the Ethics of Jesus' Kingdom (Matt. 5:48)

Matthew 5:48 concludes not only the previous section on love (vv. 43-47) but the whole section of verses 17-47. The word "perfect" here refers not to moral perfection but to a sense of holiness¹ and wholeness in one's character; the focus here is especially on indiscriminate love for all people. How does this idea serve as a good summary of the kind of life to which Jesus has called his people so far in the Sermon on the Mount?

Handwriting lines for reflection on the summary of Jesus' kingdom ethics.

Jesus summarizes the ethics of his kingdom with a call to reflect God the Father's own character. How do God's actions throughout redemptive history²

show him to be the truest embodiment of the virtues to which Jesus calls us in Matthew 5:17-47? Provide a few examples.

Handwriting lines for reflection on the truest embodiment of virtues.

How will Jesus go on from here to show the world that he is the ultimate example of the character traits he has taught in this section?

Handwriting lines for reflection on how Jesus will go on to show the world.

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

A COUNTERCULTURE OF BLESSING. The fallen human heart shamefully escalates feuds by repaying harm sevenfold (see Gen. 4:24). The Old Testament law wisely neutralized feuds by requiring equal repayment—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But Jesus brings a new power to create a new, radical standard: give more than what is asked for, love your enemies, and pray for those who curse you. In other words, we can see a progression from our natural instinct to the Old Testament law and to Jesus' new standard: (1) We naturally want to repay *more* than the harm done to us. (2) The Old Testament limits repayment to that which is *equal* to the harm done to us. (3) Jesus calls us to do *good* in place of harm. This is a radical standard, but one that Jesus himself models and empowers. He gives eternal life to those who deserve death, he makes his enemies his friends, and he prays for those who crucify him (Luke 23:34). What can we do but be melted by this love and begin treating others as he so kindly treats us? And, as we do, we will begin creating a counterculture of blessing.

THE FATHER'S KINDNESS. Jesus calls us to a radical standard of kindness in the Sermon on the Mount. And yet he summarizes all of this by calling us to be like the heavenly Father (Matt. 5:45, 48). The ethical life that sounds nearly impossible to us is natural to God the Father. This is what he is like. This is his heart. He is faithful to his word, he blesses those who offend him, and he loves his enemies—and he has shown us this faithful and loving heart through giving his only Son for us on the cross. If you want to summarize the ethical life Jesus calls us to, look to the Father's kindness.

Whole-Bible Connections

REFLECTING THE HOLINESS OF GOD. When Jesus calls his people to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), he echoes the Old Testament command to be holy as God is holy (Lev. 20:26; see also Deut. 18:13). When God called his people to be holy, he was calling them to a life set apart and devoted to him. Jesus evokes this idea and expresses it with a similar word, “perfect.” This word refers first not to moral perfection but to a sense of holiness and wholeness in character. This is the kind of life wholly set apart and devoted to God. It is the non-hypocritical and straightforward life of integrity, the life that values God above all things and then thinks, speaks, and acts in light of that reality. We must be holy as God is holy, which means we must devote ourselves wholly to him.

Theological Soundings

COMMON GRACE. Jesus points to his Father's character in order to motivate followers to love their enemies. God the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). The sun and the rain are two of God's great and vital gifts to humanity. Yet not one person deserves these blessings. Even so, God gives them indiscriminately to all—to God-lovers and God-haters alike. Theologians refer to this reality of God's universal blessing as “common grace,” for it is the grace of God that is common to all people, both those who trust him and those who do not.

IMITATING GOD. Jesus' vision of ethics in Matthew 5:38–48 is largely about imitating God. He summarizes it like this: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). To be perfect here refers to a sense of wholeness. It is a whole-person reflection of God's own good character in all of life. This means that Christian behavior is not arbitrary, nor do we look for a standard of goodness outside of God himself. As the apostle Paul later puts it, we are called to be “imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1). Jesus is inviting us into a Spirit-empowered life that reflects the beauty of God's good character.

Personal Implications

Reflect on how to apply what you have learned in this text to your everyday life. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole. Also write down what you have learned that can lead you to praise God, repent of sin, trust his gracious promises, and live in obedience to him.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Matthew 5:38–48

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to pray and ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Matthew 5:38–48. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.

Definitions

- ¹ **Holiness** – A quality possessed by something or someone set apart for a special role in relation to God. When applied to God himself, it refers to his utter perfection and complete transcendence over creation. God's people are called to imitate his holiness (Lev. 19:2), which means being set apart from sin and reserved for his purposes.
- ² **Redemptive history** – The progressive unfolding in history of God's plan to redeem his people. God's purposes of redemption become clearer and more developed through his acts in history and through his successive relation to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, and in the New Testament.