

# Overcoming Evil

Matthew 5:38-48

So far in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has taught profoundly how to be righteous on the inside: to be sexually chaste and whole, to be free of consuming anger, to speak the truth and keep your word. We have to deal with sin that originates in our hearts, but also with the evil we encounter outside of and against us. This section is one of the most misunderstood teachings of Christ. He is not advocating inaction in the face of evil, pacifism, avoiding enemies or pretending they don't exist. Jesus teaches us how to overcome evil with good, to be thriving and victorious children of God.

## Turn the Other Cheek

Jesus quotes the *lex talionis*, the law that forbids personal vengeance and requires proportionate retribution (Ex. 21:24-25; Lev. 24:20, Deut. 19:21). The Pharisees interpreted the law to mean the opposite, to justify their personal grudges and vengeance. The Old Testament could not be more plain: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Yahweh" (Lev. 19:18). Jesus teaches the fullness of God's law in order to refute its misinterpretation and set His people on a course of triumphant grace: "But I tell you, do not resist the evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (v. 39). He is not commanding His disciples not to resist evil. He never stops resisting evil. He withstands the Devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4), confounds the Pharisees and scribes, refuses to allow people to throw Him off a cliff (Lk. 4:28-30), and ultimately triumphs over evil on the cross. He is the true resistance. The phrase "do not resist the evil person" can also be translated "do not resist by using evil", and the verb "resist" identified one with a political faction that employed violence, returning evil for evil. Jesus resists evil by doing good and forbids His people from joining those who fight dirty. That's the way to multiply sin and death when God wants life and peace. Jesus teaches a better way that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. He is also not advocating absolute non-violence or prohibiting self-defense. The law states that if a thief breaks in at night (potentially threatening lives), there is no guilt for killing him. But if he steals in the daytime without threatening life, then you may not kill him (Ex. 22:2-3). Jesus also tells the disciples to carry swords, which would obviously be for self-defense (Lk. 22:36-38). Getting slapped is not life-threatening, but it is horribly insulting. The right cheek would be struck by either the left hand, which was used for going to the bathroom and other dirty work, or by the back of the right hand, which communicated superiority and contempt for a lesser person. Either way the disciple is being despised, and Jesus says rather than returning "justice"—slap for slap, insult for insult—in order to try to take them down to where they brought you, offer them the other cheek. The victim here does two things. First, he refuses to be a victim; the slap is not identity-shattering and doesn't have to be returned. The insult has no sting, and for one who has been listening to Jesus, it's even received as an honor: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you..." (Matt. 5:11). Second, taking a second slap absorbs what ought to be done to the slapper. The disciple takes it for him, eye for eye. Guilt and shame come upon the slapper, but the Christian is not hurling it, cursing, blaming, or striking back. He is not running away, but making the perpetrator deal it out and then bear the consequences of being the person who did so. Rather than get into a never-ending legal battle for your tunic, give him your cloak, too, and stand there shirtless (v. 40). The Roman soldiers had a tyrannical law allowing them to commandeer and force a Jew to bear burdens. Jesus says "Do it, and go another mile" (v. 41). Give to the one who asks and lend to the one who needs to borrow (v. 42). Jesus isn't saying, "Grin and bear it, be tough and stoic and just get through it." These are bold, intentional, patient, risky, relational, and astonishingly effective means of overcoming evil. Contrast the singing, peaceful, self-controlled civil rights marches a generation ago, and the cursing, destructive, violent riots of the past year. Which overcame evil, and which perpetrated it?

## Love Your Enemy

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (v. 44). So far Jesus' commands refer to external actions: take a slap and turn

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the other cheek, give your cloak as well as your tunic, go the second mile, give and lend. Now He addresses our motives. Leviticus 19:18 doesn't include the part about hating your enemy. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Prov. 25:21). You even have to care about your enemy's donkey: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it" (Ex. 23:4-5). Nothing Jesus says about how to treat enemies strictly affects the actions He already required. But how can we effectively do these things without the right motivation? The reason for doing so could not be more important: "that you may be sons of your Father 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" (v. 45). The unjust are God's enemies. Jesus doesn't say, "Don't have any enemies" and in fact warns us about us about not having any (Lk. 6:26). Enemies are people who oppose you, don't like what you believe and how you act, and would like to see you change or be unsuccessful or worse in some regard. Jesus doesn't like how the Pharisees think or act, and so He has hard words for them, which are also loving words calling them to change. Jesus brings our enemies close. Not all neighbors are enemies, but we are to treat all enemies as neighbors: loving, blessing, doing good, and praying for them. Doing this often transforms enemies into friends—a glorious outcome—but this is not the reason Jesus gives. Rather, "that you may be sons of your Father 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" (v. 45). You don't earn sonship by loving your enemies, but you look like your Father when you do so. He send rain on the unjust even though they won't thank Him. So we must love our enemies, asking ourselves what would bless us if we were in their shoes. Moses and Jesus know sometimes we're not going to feel like it, and especially when we find a little bit of pleasure in the fact that his donkey is out of commission, "and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it" (Ex. 23:5). Examine your heart: "But they *did this thing* to me." Like backhanded you in the face? There's a chasm between enabling evil and obeying Jesus, and to be wise and obedient we must have a vision for suffering. Otherwise, we'll run away from uncomfortable discussions and relationships, failing to overcome evil.

## The Perfection of God

Being really good to those who love you is natural, and even tax collectors do it (v. 46). Jesus gets really practical, down to who we say "hi" to: "And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (vv. 47-48). "Brethren" means Christians, people in the family of God, and sometimes we don't even do this! Abraham, Joseph, David, Elisha all imitated God in loving their enemies (Gen. 14:14, 50:19-21; 1 Sam. 24, 26; 2 Kgs. 6:22-23). None compare to Jesus. He turned the other cheek, blessed those who persecuted Him, and prayed for the very people who were crucifying Him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34). He is *the* Son of the Father, and He did this so that you could be so in Him. This is the completeness and fullness of God the Father in heaven given to us by the Son.