

Are you Loving?

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[0 : 00] All you need is love, sang the Beatles. Jennifer Lopez said her love don't cost a thing.! Ed Sheeran was in love with the shape of you. The Righteous Brothers claimed you've lost that loving feeling.

! Now it's gone, gone, gone, oh, gone. Meat Loaf said he would do anything for love, but he wouldn't do that. Whatever that is. The Lumineers think the opposite of love's indifference. That's a good line.

Black Eyed Peas questioned where is the love, but Beyonce didn't. She sang your love's got me looking so crazy right now. Tina Turner asked what's love got to do with it and Whitney Houston sang I will always love you.

I'll stop there. I won't let you suffer any longer. It's probably a good place to stop. But it's interesting, isn't it, that the popular songs of our culture all seek to try and define love for us.

And whilst our culture might like to sing about love, what we discover is that our culture is obviously confused about what love is. So what is love? How would you answer that question? And more personally and more pointedly, are you a loving person?

[1 : 29] How would you answer that? Or how would those around about you answer that question? Because what we see when we hear Jesus teaching about love is that his teaching is so radical.

And we come to this next stage of the Sermon on the Mount, and what we find is what Jesus says about love is both countercultural and personally challenging.

Because it forces us to reflect on the extent of our love, to ask ourselves, how loving am I in reality? How loving am I in all of the different relationships that I have with those around me?

And especially in these verses today, Jesus is causing us to consider how loving we are towards our enemies, or those who have wronged us. Now Jesus' teaching on love comes in the context of a whole number of issues in the Sermon on the Mount, where he is concerned about the correct interpretation and application of the law of God.

And his words, we've noticed, form a familiar pattern. Six times, Jesus essentially says, You have heard that it was said, but I tell you.

[2 : 49] And what Jesus is doing is he's drawing a distinction between how the Jewish teachers had wrongly interpreted and applied the law, and how he himself is giving the real meaning and the true application of God's law to our lives.

And so in these next two sections, verse 38 to 48 of chapter 5, Jesus now tells us to show love towards an evil person, verse 39, and also our enemies, verse 44.

For the focus is on who we love and on how we love. And what we discover is that Jesus shows us where we get the power to love, where it comes from.

And that means this afternoon for you and for me, we shouldn't leave here without knowing how to become more loving.

And it's not something that we all want to be. We want to be more loving in the relationships that we have. And so that's the challenge for us from Jesus' words today. And so let's consider this message under three headings this afternoon.

[4 : 01] First, love resists retaliation, verse 38 to 42. Second, love refuses distinction, verse 43 to 47.

And then third, love reflects God, in verse 48. So first of all, love resists retaliation. So verse 38 to 42, the first section, Jesus shows how love resists retaliation.

Let's read verse 38 into 39. You have heard that it was said, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. Now, the Old Testament included this principle, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

It was known as the *lex talionis*, or the law of just retribution. And it provided a principle of justice for the people.

[5 : 01] It appears three times in the Old Testament. You'll notice in the footnote there, in Exodus chapter 21, verse 24. In Leviticus chapter 24, verse 20.

And in Deuteronomy chapter 19, verse 21. And the intention was to make sure that the punishment fits the crime.

And so it was for the law courts. So that they wouldn't hand down stricter sentences than were necessary. And they were designed to restrain retaliation and to stop people from taking personal revenge.

Or having personal vendettas against others. And so this was for the social good, the social fabric of society, for justice to be done.

And it's actually where we get the principle of proportionality from. A core concept in law and in ethics. So that in our Western legal systems, they're founded on this.

[6 : 02] Simply to ensure that the punishment is not excessive or disproportionate to the crime. And it's meant to ensure a just society.

And yet in Jesus' day, what had happened was that it had become an opportunity for personal vengeance. And there's no doubt here that Jesus wanted to uphold the law of Moses.

But rather than the law eye for eye and tooth for tooth, it became an opportunity for retaliation. But what Jesus teaches is that it is actually or it should be an opportunity for love instead.

But not simply seeing it as *quid pro quo*. That is this for that or something for something. But seeing it as an occasion for grace. And not merely justice.

And so while eye for eye and tooth for tooth is justice, Jesus isn't saying that justice doesn't matter.

Of course justice matters. He is saying that revenge shouldn't be part of our lives.

[7 : 13] We should live differently and be ready to show love and to act with grace. Especially when we've been wronged and especially towards our enemies.

Jesus is even saying, lay aside your rights. Whether they be legal or otherwise. That's why he says in verse 39, do not resist an evil person.

Now the word resist in the original is a legal term. And it could be translated take to court or stand up in court against. And so it's got this sense of fighting it out in court.

Just to ensure that justice is done. But Jesus is not suggesting that we should forget about our legal rights. And he's certainly not suggesting that we should overlook evil in any way.

But rather we shouldn't stand on our legal rights as if that is all that matters. Jesus is teaching a different way. And it's a way that follows his own example.

[8 : 21] Where we're not to have the attitude that says, just wait till I get them back. Even if he is evil or she is evil.

We're to go the better way of showing love instead of revenge. Of not just wanting justice, but to do more and to show grace.

And so Jesus gives us four powerful examples here of what this looks like in practice. In verse 39 to 42. The first is turning the other cheek. The second is handing over your coat.

The third is going the extra mile. And the fourth is giving to those who ask. Let's look at these briefly. First, turning the other cheek. Verse 39. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

Now Jesus, let's be clear. He is not saying here, just be a doormat. And let people slap you about and trample all over you.

[9 : 22] He's not saying that. And it's important for us to understand this. Because back in those days, a slap on the right cheek was a backhanded slap.

And it was a massive insult as opposed to a minor injury. So we're talking insult rather than injury here. It was to treat somebody in a disrespectful way and to treat them as being less than human. In fact, it's still regarded as a serious insult in Middle Eastern cultures. And apparently, back then, it was the kind of insult that you could take someone to court over.

Not for common assault, but for defamation of character. Because it was an offense against your reputation. Hugely insulting. And so when Jesus says, turn the other cheek, he is not saying, just let people beat you up.

He's saying that while you have been insulted, the insult is real. But don't retaliate against that insult. Because by turning the other cheek, you're showing that you don't actually need to fight

back.

[10:34] That there is another way of handling it. And so you can take the insult and you don't need to worry about your reputation. Because ultimately, you're secure in God.

If God is your father, then you're secure in him. No matter what anyone else says or does. And that is so counter-cultural, isn't it? Back then, but also today.

And yet I think it will disarm people more than retaliation will. Because by refusing retaliation, even against opponents, it is by going the loving way of Jesus.

And it helps give our opponents a glimpse of him. And what it means to live for him. So that's the first thing. Turning the other cheek. The second is handing over your coat.

Verse 40. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. So there's a picture here of the man being sued for his shirt, which would be his inner clothing.

[11:37] And Jesus says, hand over your coat as well, which would be your outer clothing. And that is not a typical response, is it? To hand somebody something extra.

To give more than what is demanded. But Jesus clearly doesn't mean here, just give away all your clothes so that when you're in court, you're just standing there naked. No.

I think the significance of the coat is important for understanding this. Because for the Jew, a coat was something that was sacred and it was valuable. And in Exodus 22, it says if your coat is taken as a pledge, then it had to be returned by sunset.

Because your coat was important. It wasn't just your body clothing during the day, but your coat was also your bed clothing during the night. It's what you slept in and so you needed it.

And so this is another example of Jesus saying here, you don't need to insist upon your rights. But you can lovingly go beyond, above and beyond the call of duty.

[12:44] And again, I think this disarms people, doesn't it? There's not a normal and natural way to behave. Because generosity, even towards our opponents, is the gracious way of Jesus.

And it gives people a glimpse of him. And then thirdly, there's going the extra mile. Verse 41. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Now, the context of this picture is the right of the Roman army to force people to assist them. So Jewish citizens could be conscripted by a Roman soldier to carry his gear, his kit, all the way that he was going and carry it for them.

So it was humiliating. That's the first thing. It was emphasizing the loss of freedom for the Jewish people. But Jesus says, if you're forced to go this 1,000 paces that was required by the regulations, then Jesus is saying, then go an extra 1,000 paces.

Go the same distance again. Now, a soldier couldn't force you to go the extra distance. He could only force you to go a certain distance. But Jesus is saying, you can demonstrate your freedom, your real freedom, by volunteering more than is required of you.

[14:06] And it's a startling way of saying that you belong to another kingdom, that you submit to the authority of another king. And so rather than insist upon your rights, you can lovingly serve beyond what is asked of you.

And again, this kind of behavior will disarm people, won't it? Because going the extra mile, even for our opponents, is the servant way of Jesus.

And it gives them a glimpse of him. And then fourthly, there's giving to those who ask. Verse 42.

Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

So Jesus tells us to give to those who beg and who want to borrow from us. And there's no indication here as to what to give or how much to give. And there's obviously no legal duty to give. And you're under no obligation to give just because somebody asks you. And again, it's to do with insisting upon your rights. Jesus says you don't have to insist upon your rights by keeping what belongs to you.

[15:12] You can give generously when somebody asks. And again, it will disarm those who want to beg and borrow from us.

Because giving, even to those we don't know, is the generous way of Jesus. And it will give people a glimpse of him. And so as we apply this, well, in every example that Jesus gives here, he basically drills home the message that love resists retaliation.

Love does far more. Love goes far further than just simply doing the necessary or the essential. And we know that, don't we?

That love is basically the only thing that can break the cycle of retribution. This violent cycle of somebody does that to me. I get them back by doing this or more to them. And then they come back and they do that to me. And it goes on and on and on. But Jesus is saying here, this violent cycle just continues. But if you are people who love, then you can stop it. [16:23] Love that resists retaliation, Jesus is saying, should characterize our relationships. And so it may mean that we refuse insisting on our rights in certain situations.

And that's never easy, is it? And yet this is being taught by the one who refused to insist on his rights. Remember those verses in Philippians chapter 2? True, Jesus made himself nothing and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. And so God exalted him to the highest place.

And so we should seek to have this same mindset as Christ. That's our first point. Love resists retaliation. Second point is that love refuses distinction.

And in verse 43 to 47, Jesus teaches this, how love refuses distinction. Let's read verse 43 to 44.

[17:26] 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. Now when you look at verse 43, love your neighbor is a direct quotation from the Old Testament.

It's from Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18. Where it says there, love your neighbor as yourself. So it's a command.

But the words hate your enemy are found nowhere in the Old Testament. You can look, but you won't find them. But obviously, in Jesus' day, people have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

So what's going on? Well, what had happened was, yet again, the Jewish teachers, the Pharisees and the scribes, they had wrongly interpreted and applied God's law. They were teaching, as long as you love your neighbor, then, well, you can legitimately hate your enemy.

Which, in practice, for the Jews, was only loving fellow Jews. And so that's the narrow definition of neighbor that the teachers of the law, the Pharisees, were teaching.

[18:47] That love your neighbor means also hate your enemy. Which meant they could only love people of their own race and their own religion.

And could hate everybody outside of that. But that's not where Jesus is coming from here. And you'll remember his parable of the Good Samaritan, which came in response to the teacher of the law asking Jesus, who is my neighbor?

And he asked that question because he wanted to put limits on who he should love and how much he should love. He wanted to make a distinction between people so that, well, if this is my true neighbor, I can love him, but I don't need to bother with anybody who isn't my neighbor.

And so Jesus taught that parable, didn't he, the Good Samaritan, to show that love refuses distinction. Because neighbor, we know, includes everybody.

So our love should extend to include everyone, even those regarded as our enemies. So Jesus holds up a love for us here that refuses to make distinctions between people.

[20:04] So of all the people in the world, well, yeah, we love our friends, we love our family, of course, great. And so we should. But Jesus is not wanting us to make such fine distinctions when it comes to the expression of our love.

He's saying he wants us to show the same intensity of love to everybody. Even those people you don't like, Jesus is saying, love them.

Even those people who want to harm you, Jesus is saying, love them. Wow. Wow. What an amazing kind of love to be able to love in that way.

And so if that's who we are to love, basically everybody, including our enemies, then how do we show our love? Well, what does Jesus say? Pray for those who persecute you.

Why does he say that? Why pray for enemies, people who persecute us? Well, could it be that we can appear to love people with our actions and yet fail to love them in our hearts?

[21:14] We can behave in such a way that the things we do and the things we say seem to give the impression that we love other people, whereas inside we can really just hate them or be annoyed with them.

And we're just putting on some kind of pretense so that others think that we love, whereas we know we don't really love. Because that's what Jesus has been teaching, hasn't it, so far, about murder, about adultery, about divorce, and about oaths.

On the outside, yeah, you're not murdering somebody, but Jesus said, what about your heart and the anger? On the outside, you're not committing adultery, but Jesus says, well, what about in your heart and your lust?

On the outside, well, yes, you're not breaking your oaths, but on the inside, you can seek to deceive and trick people.

And so outwardly, we can have this kind of tick box exercise where everything seems good, but inwardly, it can be a completely different story. And so when it comes to pray for those who persecute you, prayer really has to do with the desires of our hearts, doesn't it?

[22 : 31] And so it's impossible, if you've ever tried, it's impossible to genuinely pray for somebody if there's hatred, even just ill feeling towards them in our hearts.

You can't really pray for them. But when we truly pray for our enemy, what we're wanting is we're wanting God's best for them. And so praying for them will move us beyond hatred and even beyond nice feelings towards another person, towards love for them.

In other words, the moment that we begin to pray for a person who we may have considered our enemy, then when we pray for them, we no longer are considering them to be our enemy.

Instead, we're viewing them from the right perspective. We're seeing them as God sees them, not just as we see them, which is as an enemy. We're not seeing them as an intimidating persecutor, but we're seeing them as somebody who needs God to change their heart and change their life.

As we've got to try and see people as God sees people. Because loving and praying for our enemies, what does it indicate? It indicates that we are children of our Father in heaven.

[23 : 57] Because after all, what's Jesus saying here? Verse 45, Jesus is saying God loves everyone.

He even blesses his enemies with sun and rain the same way he blesses his children. And so God himself is the strongest motive for loving our enemies, because that's exactly what he does.

God has every right to smash his enemies and destroy them for the way that they have treated him. But what does he do? He continues to show love.

And Jesus says we are to do the same if we are his children, like father, like son. Of course, this applies to Jesus, like father, like son.

But when we know God as father, and we know Jesus as our king, then we're to live a kingdom life in this world. A life that reflects our father, God, our saviour, Jesus, and displays the family likeness.

[25 : 17] Last time I went to my son Matthew's parents' evening, one of the teachers came up to me. I'd never met this teacher before. I'd never seen her, don't remember her, I knew who she was, but she'd never seen me.

And she said, I can tell straight away that you're Matthew's dad, because he looks just like you. Which is unfortunate for Matthew, I know. And I'm sure he will grow out of it, hopefully, as the days go by.

But what Jesus is saying here is, as God's children, we should display the family likeness in our dealings with other people, shouldn't we? And Jesus drills this home further still, verse 46 and 47.

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 own people, what are you doing more than others?

Do not even the pagans do that? Jesus is saying the people of this world love the people who love them. That's what the tax collectors do.

[26 : 22] They're hated. They're the scum of the earth. But, Jesus says, they still love people. They love the people who love them. And so do the pagans.

So those who are neither Jew nor Christian and have no interest in God, Jesus says, they still love their own people. That is a normal thing for human beings to do, is to love people who love you.

Of course, people love their family and people love their friends and are loved in return. But Jesus says, well, as a child of your heavenly Father, you're not just to love those who love you.

Because if that's all you do, well, good, if you do that. He's not saying, don't love your family and friends. But you're not doing anything more and you're not doing anything better than all the other people in the world.

Scumbags and scoundrels, whoever they are, they still love. So you're no different from them.

That's what Jesus is saying. But he's saying, you don't belong to the world. You belong to the kingdom of heaven.

[27 : 31] So you live by a different standard. So your love must extend beyond to those who don't love you. It's a love that refuses distinction between people because it's a love that should reflect God's love for us.

And as children of our Father in heaven, that should be the way that we love people around us. And so that leads us to our third and final point.

First, love resists retaliation. Love refuses distinction. And thirdly, love reflects God. So the standard of love that Jesus gives reflects God's perfect character.

Check verse 48. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Now when Jesus tells us to be perfect, just like the Father, he's not suggesting that we can become perfect in this life because we can't.

That is impossible. But Jesus is describing the way the Father's love is displayed in its perfection by the way that the Father loves his enemies.

[28 : 41] And so the word perfect here is also translated elsewhere as mature. And so God shows his perfect, his mature love by the way he loves those who don't love him in return.

So we get this in Romans chapter 5, verse 8. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And so God's love is not determined by the object being lovable or lovely. Because the sinners were his enemies.

We aren't lovable and we aren't lovely. And yet God demonstrates his love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

While we had nothing to offer God, we were expressing no love to him whatsoever. And yet God loves us despite what we are.

[29 : 47] And it's this perfect love of God for his enemies that Jesus wants us to reflect towards others. Where our love for them is not determined by their love for us.

Where we don't just love them because they're lovely or they're lovable. But we love them because we have a Father in heaven who loves us while we were still sinners. And so our love is not controlled or should not be controlled by the object, whether friend or enemy, but controlled by our Father in heaven.

Which means, well, we're to love irrespective of how worthy the other person is of our love. They might not be worthy of our love.

They may be very unworthy because they're our enemy and they've persecuted us. And that's why Jesus calls us to be perfect, therefore, as our Heavenly Father is perfect because he wants us to model a love that reflects God's love.

Where because we have experienced God's love in our hearts and in our lives, then, well, we will resist retaliation and we will refuse distinction between people.

[31 : 02] And so Jesus' words here in verse 48, basically, they sum up his teaching about love for enemies, but they also sum up this whole bit in the Sermon on the Mount from chapter 5, verse 21, through to verse 48.

In fact, they sum up all he's been teaching in the Sermon on the Mount so far. Because when Jesus calls us to be perfect, as our Heavenly Father is perfect, he's been showing us what that's going to look like in our lives, how it's going to be fleshed out in our relationships with other people.

But you may be asking, Jonathan, that's great. That is nice to hear that. It sounds good. But, how possible is it to live in the way that Jesus calls us to live?

How realistic? In fact, even how desirable is it? to want to live our enemies and those who persecute us, to want to pray for them.

How is anybody supposed to be able to do this? Well, we all know it is impossible to do in our own strength. It's unnatural.

[32 : 14] We can't do it. but Jesus doesn't have to be able to live this kind of life and expect us just to get on with it and go and do it.

No, Jesus lived this life before us. But Jesus also lived this life for us. And so, when Jesus says, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, it is exactly what Jesus did himself.

Out of love for his enemies, Jesus let them accuse him, arrest him, mock him, beat him, and crucify him. And then, as he was being killed by his enemies, what did he pray when he was on the cross? Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. So, on the cross, Jesus wasn't thinking about himself, was he?

As he hung there dying, Jesus was thinking about us. Because Jesus died to forgive all the sin that makes us God's enemies.

[33 : 24] And so, through his death, God not only satisfies his justice by Jesus being punished in our place, but God offers us his grace.

So that we no longer need to continue as his enemies but can become his children through faith in Jesus. And it's to the extent that the love of God melts our hearts as we remember what he has done for us in giving us his son and his spirit transforms our life from the inside out it's to the extent that we remember this and know this that we can then love our enemies.

Because Jesus fulfilled all of God's law for us and he took all our punishment for failing to keep it. And now his spirit empowers us to live it out too.

which means our love will not just want to but our love will actually be able to resist retaliation and refuse distinction because it's a love that reflects our Father in heaven.

May it be so. Let's pray. to to to to to! to!