

## Love Your Enemies

Jonathan K. Dodson | Matthew 5:38-48 | July 24, 2015

A big thank you to Evan and Austin for preaching in my absence, and preaching difficult texts well and with wisdom. It's great to have a diversity of gifted teachers in our church. This morning we arrive at a passage that is, for some, incredibly inspiring—Jesus' ethic of love—but for others entirely weak. On the one hand, some see Jesus' teaching of turn the other cheek as proof that Christianity is a backwards, doormat religion allowing people to be taken advantage of, teaching indifference to injustice, which may be why you *struggle* to embrace Christianity. On the other hand, many say the opposite, that it's the strength of Christ's ethic of love that compels you, "Love your enemies." Which is it weak or strong? Dostoyevsky, "*Love in practice is a dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.*" Let's pull love out of the clouds by looking at Jesus two sayings: turn the other cheek & love your enemies.

### Turn the Other Cheek

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (5:38)." Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth...what does it mean? It is often understood as an endorsement of vengeance (you take my eye I take yours). It's actually taken right out Jewish Law, and was quite progressive for the time. This is a law of retaliation (*Lex talionis*) but it's a law, a legal provision for justice. At the time, other legal systems were classist, favoring the wealthy by assigning steeper penalties to the poor, and often unjust. Punishment didn't always fit the crime. For example, under Babylonian Code of Hammurabi a man who hits a pregnant woman who miscarries should be paid, but if the woman dies, assailant's daughter is to be killed! This is not eye for eye; it's someone else's eye for an eye. The innocent for the guilty. Lex talionis is about punishment that fits the crime. **Justice.** Jesus seems to challenge justice by saying *But I say to you don't resist the one who is evil.* If anyone slaps you, don't slap them back, give them the other cheek. Imagine your kid says he's being beat up on the playground. What do you tell him? "Tell your bully to hit the other side of your face, son?" Or you entrust something very private to one of your friends, only to find out they've told others and even mocked you behind your back. Do you keep sharing private things? Injustices like ISIS, Charleston, Chattanooga, Planned Parenthood...should we just turn the other cheek or should we call for justice? When we're wronged, we feel anger. We want things to be right. But Jesus says turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. Hard to swallow? German philosopher **Nietzsche** said this is the problem with Christianity. It's weak and degrading and "[weakness is being lied into something meritorious.](#)" What's he mean? That we're told forgiveness has merit, but it's actually just a religious lie, a cover-up, to suppress our anger and longings for vengeance. Christianity is actually weak, dishonest, misguided morality. And he's right, to an extent. Nietzsche exposes something in religious practice—repression of anger. Religion tells us anger is sinful, so bury or ignore it. Paper over it with forgiveness. The problem with this is that the anger is really still there, and repressed anger distorts us leading to: bitterness, distrust, cynicism, depression, moodiness, withdrawal in relationships, fear of community. Are you

there? We repress out of a moral or Christian sensibility, but trade in our honesty. A distance creeps in between how you feel and how you act, who you are and who you see God to be. It creates a quiet crisis of identity, which also diminishes genuine hurt, injustice. The well-intentioned veneer of religious merit cheapens our Christianity, leaves us with limp in our walk or a lump in the throat. We have to confront our anger. If you don't, you will boil over or freeze up. How do we confront our anger? I had a NT professor in seminary who went to Germany to do his PhD. He and his wife found German culture so difficult. If you've ever lived in a different country you know how frustrating it can be. So he and his wife instituted a once a month "I hate Germany day." I was shocked. Doesn't God love all nations? Yes, but I'm not God. I do get frustrated about things and I need to acknowledge it. In reflecting on this, what I found particularly insightful was spousal permission to get angry. Second example. Let's say you've been betrayed or hurt in an unjust way by someone. A good spouse won't deceive you into something meritorious by telling you to bury your anger. Work it out. I do this with my wife. Job's wife, in all her pain and angst said, "Curse God and die." Job didn't jump on her. He said those are words to the wind. As a friend or spouse we need to know there's a time for words to the wind. Allow people to express the anger at injustice. Consider the Psalms 30s. Lots of anger, outrage, disappointment, despair. Do you have built up anger you need to let out? And until you do, they'll be that gap between you and others, and it will isolate or irritate you making you cynical or angry. And it will come out at least expected times. Third, repressed anger can lead to a kind *passive death*. In extreme cases sufferers take the violence they want to do to others onto themselves. Self-punishment. Something may have happened to you in the past and you belittle yourself, carry shame and guilt, and have trouble looking in the mirror because you blame yourself for your rape, molestation, abortion, or abandonment. I was in a counseling setting when I met a withdrawn, quiet, middle-aged woman. She shared that as a child countless members of her family had molested her. Once she accepted permission to let her repressed anger out, she ended up beating a pillow symbolizing her abusers for an hour, sobbing, screaming, and drained of energy she collapsed into the fetal position, only to resume hitting the pillow for another half hour. Repressed anger needs to come out. *A veneer of forgiveness is no forgiveness at all*. Nietzsche was kind of right. In true Christianity, there's room for righteous anger (not destructive, eye for another's eye anger). Now, your pastor isn't telling you *to be angry*. What I am saying is, if you are angry be angry. Don't pretend like you're not; then you're lying and angry! We have to confront anger before it can be transformed into something *redemptive*, so we can actually love our enemies, Jesus second saying.

### **Love Your Enemies**

Now you're probably thinking what about justice? Is Jesus abandoning *lex talionis*? What does it look like to turn the other cheek or love our enemies? Should we allow our kids to get beat up, should you take years of verbal abuse, love racists/terrorists but not resist them? Does turning the other cheek mean abdicating justice? My goodness, no. Jesus himself appealed to justice. When he was on trial, Jesus was struck on the face, and he appealed by asking them to bring a witness to testify if what he said was false (Jn 18:22-24). When St. Paul was beaten and unjustly thrown into prison, he appealed to justice and his Roman citizenship to be released, that punishment didn't fit the crime (Ac 16:37).

There's a place for justice. Christians should stand for it. Many of you do. What does it mean, then to turn the other cheek? Well, for one thing it means they stop hitting the other cheek. You give them another. You don't stay in same place, being perpetually hit. Slapping the cheek was an insult, but it wasn't arm-to-arm combat. I've not served in the military; I've never taken a martial arts class, but I can't imagine starting a fight with a cheek slap. Can you imagine Jason Statham picking a fight by slapping a cheek? [robie] We should be cautious about using this as text for pacifism. That isn't Jesus' point. *What Jesus does show is how to move forward when we are offended or taken advantage of.* He is advocating a kingdom ethic of love. So rather than go to court with a brother or sister in Christ, give them what they want. Prize people over property. If they smear your name, don't return the favor. Don't trade insults. Sacrifice reputation in pursuit of reconciliation. And here's where it gets hard. How do you love your enemy? Jesus says it very plainly; [pray for those who persecute you](#) (44). [If you can't pray for someone, you haven't confronted your anger and moved into love.](#) I know someone who is a professional in church conflict mediation. He says, the first thing you do is pray together when you meet to resolve conflict. If the other party can't pray with you, they aren't ready to reconcile. Why? Because one is under the lordship of personal rights or hurt, and the other is under the lordship of Christ. Until we realize that Christ is the ultimate victim, not us, and that he died to give sinners a basis for reconciliation, we won't make progress. With enemies it's a bit different but the same principle applies. Pray. [Pray for those who persecute you so you may be sons of your father who is heaven.](#) Take your enemies with you into your safest place, the presence of God. [Don't be their judge—leave that to God—and don't be their redeemer—leave that to Christ.](#) Advocate for justice but remember your enemies are people in God's image that need a divine Judge turned Redeemer in Jesus Christ. Do this, Jesus says, and you'll be sons and daughters of your Father who is heaven. You'll carry his perfect love with you into relationships, as awkward or difficult as they may be. Prayer for enemies chases out hatred as we recognize the limitless, undeserved love we have received from the Father. Jesus is the one true victim because he was truly innocent. Innocent for the guilty, a miscarriage of justice, because he elected to do it. He threw himself in front of the coming car of God's wrath to knock us under God's mercy. For we while we were enemies God reconciled us through the death of his son (Rom 5:10). The same offer is extended to all: Chattanooga, ISIS, Planned Parenthood, and those who have hurt you most. A **second** way to love your enemies is forgive as you have been forgiven (Eph 5:23). To say through tears, you hurt me deeply, and I have a wound that may not fully heal, but I forgive you. This isn't a one-time act. We have to forgive each time the memory resurfaces. Each time you recall the pain inflicted, we must struggle through the emotion to forgive as we have been forgiven. If we don't, we will fantasize about their judgment, live in fear, or invite bitterness. To love your enemy and to forgive is to always remain open to their change and reconciliation. It puts hope in God not hope in them. A friend was taken for a ride in his business. His business partner was his best friend. The guy shut the company down, took all the money, and left him with the debt. It plagued him for years. The debt, the unreconciled relationship. He would try to reach out, but was shunned. His former partner started a new business and ran it unethically. My buddy had to stand up for what was right and was shunned even more. He received hate mail and his friend tried to smear him. Eventually my friend turned to me and said how long do I have to take this? What does it mean when Jesus says turn the

other cheek? And I said to him, it doesn't mean you continue to take the abuse. Don't throw your pearls before swine. Move out of contact but always remain open to reconciliation. Years later my friend received a call before going into surgery. It was his former best friend, apologizing. Wounds were healed because he loved his enemy and didn't seek vengeance. He trusted God with justice and turned the other cheek. Jesus doesn't call us to abuse; he calls us to love. Sometimes we have to love from a distance. To give the cheek of prayer and forgiveness, but excuse ourselves from a situation or relationship. This isn't weakness; it's strength. Jesus and Paul loved their enemies. They didn't cuss out their oppressors and call hellfire down on them. They weren't venomous. **But they stood for truth and justice and were cut down for love and forgiveness.** They were perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. They imitated God: standing for justice while offering forgiveness. *Real strength* is the way of Christ through the cross of Christ... Turn your cheek *and* love your enemy.