

## **Matthew 5:38-48: Selflessness**

### **OUTLINE:**

Turning the other cheek  
Going the second mile  
Giving to those who ask  
Loving the unlovely

### **INTRODUCTION**

This portion of the Sermon on the mount is probably the most famous, besides the Lord's prayer. However, it is probably the most misunderstood, and misinterpreted. Many a Christian has bound their consciences with a hyperliteral interpretation of this portion ending up as pacifists, refusing to sign up for military service, as radical pacifists not allowing for any army, police force, or other means of resisting evil, as victims of professional beggars who know some Christians can't say no to anyone who asks. These verses have confused a lot of people, what does Jesus mean by turning the other cheek, do battered wives just have to take it? Must we impoverish ourselves if someone happens to ask for all we have? Literalistic interpretations although they sound like they are very hard and demanding actually fall short of the radical principle of selflessness that Jesus is calling for.

Jesus as in the rest of this sermon is correcting a pharisaic abuse of the law. The OT law of an eye for an eye, was a principle of justice which prevented personal retribution and over punishing. If a man stole a sheep, he was to return a sheep, not ten sheep in payment for his crimes. If a man assaulted someone, he was not to be killed but to compensate the victim. This was a principle to guide the judges of what was right in serving true justice. However, by Jesus time, this principle was now the law for settling personal vendettas. Whenever anyone was hurt, there was no forgiveness, there was no overlooking of it, there was the requirement of the pound of flesh, the exact amount that the letter of the law prescribed. A legalistic literal interpretation being used to serve the selfish agenda of revenge. This is the exact opposite purpose for which the law was given, Jesus is exposing this hijacking of the initial purpose of the law. He gives illustrations showing how we as Christians should not have hearts that sue for our personal rights but rather hearts that are governed by love and forgiveness.

### **Turning the other cheek**

The things that Jesus says are not universal laws that should be applied in every situation they are illustrations of principles about being unselfish. The first things Jesus says are to illustrate the principle of not taking revenge, of not retaliating. Whenever we are hurt, we want justice, and not only justice, we want the other person to suffer even more than we have. Our sinfulness looks for the opportunity to inflict this distorted desire, and the pharisaic interpretation of the law was giving an opening for all sorts of revenge, in the name of law, to take place. Religion can serve to help our selfish desire for revenge. Jesus says, offer no resistance, turn the other cheek. Some have misunderstood this to be talking about war, when one country attacks another, that we should not defend our country, this is not what Jesus means. Some have felt that this would justify wife battering, but this is not what Jesus is talking about. Some feel that this would encourage school bullying, but of course this is not what he means either. Jesus is simply speaking to us as individuals and asking us not to start a senseless cycle of violence, for if you get hurt and hurt in return, then the other will want their pound of flesh, then you will want to retaliate again. Jesus

teaching stops that cycle before it begins. Peace may come at the cost of allowing ourselves to suffer unjustly, but we are called to be peacemakers. This does not mean that we condone injustice, it just means that we are not willing to abuse the letter of the law to serve our desire for revenge.

### **Going the second mile**

Overcoming evil with good, responding with good for evil is Christ's teaching when someone wants to abuse you. In a world where the greatest crime is to encroach on one's rights, Christ brings a message of give up your rights. If someone wants to sue you for undergarment, then give to them the garment which the law says they cannot have. Why does Jesus say this, is he encouraging some sort of suicidal giving that has the goal of impoverishing all of his people? Once again, Christ is demonstrating the generosity that acts as oil on the water to end a feud. We in our hearts would rather fight tooth and nail just to save face or defend a wrong opinion, never mind our legal rights. Here Christ is showing how one should be willing to have a heart that has peace before self, in order to achieve that peace. Jesus deliberately uses issues where the law is in favour of those whose rights have been violated in order to demonstrate how far we should be willing to go in order to be peacemakers. Next he uses the law that a Roman soldier is only allowed to ask a Jew or anyone else in one of their occupied colonies to carry their bags for one mile. Here Jesus says that we must not have our hearts set upon the letter of the law at all costs, but should be willing to yield in order to keep the peace. The letter of the law had been acting as an excuse to get revenge here Jesus shows that the letter of the law is there to protect peace not serve selfishness.

What Jesus is asking of us is only possible if we are living the crucified life of putting self second. Self is the great enemy that seeks to assert its rights, but Christ is the great model of giving up rights in order to serve and love. Billy Bray was a rough guy who got converted, he was well known for his temper and could fight very well. One day one of his enemies heard that he was a Christian so he came over and punched him in the face. Bray said, 'May God forgive you, even as I forgive you'. This troubled the man for days until he was finally converted. This is the goal, to overcome evil with good, and not to be overcome with evil.

### **Giving to those who ask**

There was a student who impoverished himself giving to the poor. The beggars realized that he couldn't and wouldn't say no because of these verses, he ended up giving all he had away, and the beggars just ended up drinking more. Is this what Jesus means, do you think Jesus wants us to give to any one and everyone who asks, even if it will be to their own detriment? Of course not! No doubt we are to be responsible givers, but Jesus is not laying down a weird universal law, he is challenging our view of our possessions. We think we have rights over certain things, but all things are to be used for him and others, nothing is sacred in the sense that it cannot be used for others. Everything Jesus is saying can be summed as willingness to set ourselves aside. Self asserts itself at all times, the Christian is putting self to death at all times. Every evil is committed when self is put to the front, every act of revenge is self, every loveless, or lawless, or legalistic act, they all flow from the same root: self!

Christ has given a series of rebuttals to interpretations of the Law in his day, he ends with a final rebuttal on teaching about loving our enemies. The Pharisees, and others believed that you could love your neighbour, but not your enemies. This teaching meant that you could

love those who were Jews but you didn't have to love the Samaritans, Romans, etc. It gave a place for nationalistic pride, racism, hatred, cruelty, etc. So in Jesus day you would find some very religious people who would be full of hate, criticism, racism etc. As we look at the parable of the Good Samaritan we see that the lawyer was asking the question 'who is my neighbour?' betraying this legalistic accommodation for sin. There were also some verses in the OT which spoke out against the enemies of Israel in very strong terms, but those imprecatory psalms and prophecies were speaking out as God's voice of judgement not as an individual's squabble. They are judicial pronouncements not personal vendettas. Jesus maps out for us the actions and example of love.

### **Loving the unlovely**

It is easy to love those who are our family, we know them, they are loyal to us, we have a shared history together. We can love our friends easily because they are usually our friends due to a shared interest or experience. Our neighbours can be easy to love as long as they don't bother us too much, even the occasional act of kindness to a stranger is easy. But to love our enemies is a completely different thing altogether. How do you love someone who wants to hurt you, and who sets out to hurt you; unlike someone who hurts you by mistake and is ready with a sincere apology? The key is prayer, 'pray for those who persecute you'. When we pray we come with an unarguing and honest heart before God. When we pray we bring ourselves before the God who can see all thoughts and motives. We cannot convince him with the lies that others might buy. He can see when we are sincere and when we're just looking for an excuse. Prayer forces us to be honest about our own sins. Prayer also gives us a breather, a time when we can reflect without reacting from an emotional response to our enemies. It acts as a time when we can remind ourselves of God's commandments, of our duties. Prayer is very important, for in prayer we are reminded of the spiritual truths about our enemies. When our enemies hurt us, they are acting out of their sinful natures, giving us a reminder of the power that is killing them and holds them under eternal judgement, they are like caged animals who have been teased, insane people who are tormented within. It is in prayer that we will be able to remind ourselves of the truth about our enemies. If we look at the situation without praying we will probably only evaluate things in light of our pain and measure out our response according to our level of discomfort. And when we actually begin to pray for those who are our enemies, and reflect perhaps upon the Lord's prayer, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us', our hearts begin to melt, for . It is in prayer that we are in our right minds and our hearts will fill with compassion as we meditate upon their condition more than our pain, it is here that we are filled with the Holy Spirit anew, and the fruit of love. It is here as we silence the raging tantrums of self that we regain control and perspective. And as we wrestle with ourselves and feel the strength that is within our old natures that we cry out for help from God and cast ourselves upon his strength to help us kill the self that wants to rise up and take revenge. The command to love is followed by the means of prayer.

Jesus tells us the reason for why we are to love our enemies, so that we will be sons of our father in heaven, that we will reflect his perfection. Here Jesus gives the example of God giving rain. You see the people in this world who are not believers, who have not repented of their sins, they are like rebels who are living in a country and trying to constantly overthrow the government. God is the leader of that country and those who refuse to repent and accept God as lord are the rebels, they are God's enemies. However, he still gives them good things like rain, this is called God's common grace. Most people would think it strange that God has enemies since he is love. But this is the truth, he looks down on the world and sees people that are hanging over hell, who are on death row, who have been sentenced and will die unless they are willing to receive his pardon. But he loves us

and calls us to leave this rebellion behind. So he sends his Son to die, he allows us to murder his child, so that we can be saved, this is love. God loves his enemies. He continues to do good to them even though they hate and reject him. He gives rain, and all the fullness of life to his enemies. He does not change in his behaviour towards them, this is what we are called to imitate. We are called to be perfect as he is perfect. This is where we need to remind ourselves of the role of the Holy Spirit to help us, we are helpless without his influence, teaching, reminders, convictions, etc. Let me end with a story of someone who has tried to do this very thing and God used this love to transform lives.

Betty Olson was a single Christian nurse who felt the call to go and serve God as a missionary in South Vietnam in 1965. She joined a team of missionaries at Banmethuot. Three of the missionaries had already been kidnapped the Viet-Cong. She was able to do her nursing and minister to the young people, until in late 1967, and early 1968 the Viet-Cong began to attack locations around the missionary compound. The missions station was attacked and of the ten missionaries six were killed, two were wounded and two were taken as prisoners along with an American soldier. The three prisoners were then marched through the thick jungle walking many miles every day. They had to sleep padlocked together in bamboo cages. They had very little to eat and were soon feeling the effects of starvation. Betty Olson and Hank Blood were missionaries, but the American soldier Mike Bengé, he was not. Hank and Betty used the opportunity to evangelize Mike. Malnutrition, blisters, boils and dengue fever were having their effects as they continued their forced march. The Americans began begging for medicine, this request was ignored. There was also a Rada Pastor from one of the local tribes, with some other Vietnamese prisoners. He told Betty that he was going to help them escape, when she asked how. The pastor told her that he and the other prisoners would club the soldiers to death. Betty refused to be rescued and would not allow the pastor to kill her cruel captors. The pastor escaped without rescuing her. After three months they were skin and bone, and then the rains started bringing with them blood sucking leeches. Hank developed Pneumonia and soon faded to death's door, as he died on his lips were words of love for family and his captors. By now Betty and Mike had lost all body hair, their hair was grey, their nails had stopped growing, and their legs were swollen. Betty took a turn for the worse due to bad food, and neared death's door herself, as she was dying she told Mike to tell her captors, those who had killed her friends, death marched her, and refused to give her medicine, that she loved them, and that God loves them. And she died. Mike survived and was taken to several prisoner of war camps, everywhere he went he told people about Jesus Christ. Betty and Hank followed the example of Christ as they loved their captors who slowly killed them with their marches, starvation, and refusing to treat them. (Some gave all, Ellen Caughey, p59-104).