

# Matthew 5:38-48

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, please turn up Matthew chapter 5, the passage that we read earlier. Here's a question. Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable.

It's not my question, which is why the reference is to 2000. It's a quote from the book by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his vast book, *A Secular Age*.

At a basic level, it has to do with what modern Westerners find believable, what is plausible, what is the sort of thing that is just plain and obvious to us in our world.

There aren't more religious options available today, but it does seem, and this is Charles Taylor's argument that unbelief has become the default. That is, it has become the thing that people just fall into without really even thinking about it, because it seems like the most plausible way to live in the world that we live in. Now, Taylor's vast book unpicks some of the thinking that has led to this point. It talks about our love affair with self and the individualism that frames our thinking. It talks about the way that we've made life, about the here and now, and what he describes as disenchanting the world. That is, we've kind of cut ourselves off from anything that's above us that we don't really understand or is mysterious to us. He speaks about living in a world that is disenchanted. But it is fair to say, I think, that our passage this evening is right up there when it comes to things that we think are impossible to believe. They're well-known bits of the Bible, but they sound like a fantasy. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Love your neighbors, love your enemies rather, and pray for those who persecute you. Love people who treat you really badly and pray for those who are doing it. How can anyone live like this?

[ 2 : 1 9 ] Our culture, I think, we've got to a point in our culture where this kind of thing is said and they go complete fantasy. It's impossible. It might sound nice, but it's not realistic. It's not the real world.

And yet, as we see here, Matthew chapter 5, it is the life of greater righteousness, the righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, wholehearted devotion that citizens of Christ's kingdom must embrace. So, we need to understand what he's saying. We need to understand how it is possible, and not only possible, but actually credible. And not only credible, but what we see here, as I hope we've been seeing as we've been visiting these passages in this sermon over the time that we've been looking at it, is that here is a vision of life that is truly beautiful.

It's not only possible. It isn't simply credible. It's beautiful. And as we embrace this, we live a beautiful life that says something to the world around us. That is what Jesus wants his followers to do.

I've got two points this evening that fit with the two sections that we looked at. Jesus is calling us here, number one, to generosity that reaches beyond your rights. Generosity that reaches beyond your rights. Verse 38, you've heard it said, you've 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. Now, as we've discovered in this sort of greater righteousness section of the sermon, Jesus is quoting laws. You have heard it said, and he goes back to the laws that they are taking. And here he's quoting Exodus 21-24, Leviticus 24-20, and Deuteronomy 19-21. In summary, those are laws regarding punishment for wrongs.

This law, kind of revisited in each of those passages, it was established to provide the principle for justice at the societal level. These were laws for society. It was given to govern legal relationships, to control excesses, and to ensure that any punishment fit the crime. As such, its aim, the law's aim was to limit violence and the pursuit of revenge. It was not given as a principle for personal relationships, which is how the scribes and the Pharisees were using it. If someone wronged them, they would say, I have a legal right to revenge. It's in the law, an eye for an eye, you see?

[ 5 : 03 ] This is the problem. It's not the command itself that's problematic. It's the use of the command in the right setting. The so-called lex talionis is a right and good principle for safeguarding society, that the punishment fits the crime. It's good for safeguarding society and upholding justice, but we don't apply that law in personal relationships. So Jesus says, by contrast, they say an eye for an eye is okay in interpersonal relationships. He says, 39, do not resist the one who is evil. Don't resist them. And the word resist here has the sense of take to court. So he's saying that when you're wronged, don't insist on getting justice in your personal relationships. The Christian, he's saying, shouldn't think about getting their own back or even insisting on their rights. Jonathan Pennington in his book on the Sermon on the Mount says this, this law is good for society as a prevention of violence. It fights against people taking justice into their own hands. Jesus does not contradict this, but he offers the true heart-level virtue that corresponds precisely with this command. As lust is to adultery and anger to murder,

Jesus speaks to the heart matter. Do not be a vengeful, vigilante, self-justified distributor of justice. You get that? Do not be a vengeful, vigilante, self-justified distributor of justice.

There is a righteousness greater and more beautiful than self-justice, end quote. So what does that look like? What does the righteousness that is greater and more beautiful than self-justice look like? Well, he goes on to explain. That's what Jesus then teases out.

What does the greater righteousness look like when challenges come our way? Well, he starts with our dignity, verse 39. Our dignity. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. When he mentions that, he's very specific. Do you notice when someone slaps you on the right cheek? Why does he say that? Well, because he's referring to being slapped by the back of the hand. On the right cheek. It was an insult. It was a way of expressing disdain. And in the culture, it brought disgrace to the person. It was a way of disgracing them and disgracing their family as it happens. So you could take the person who did this to you to court. Now that's important, just to be clear. Jesus is not saying if someone is abusing you that you should stand there and take it.

[ 7 : 52 ] If someone hits you, don't just let it happen because of this verse. Jesus is talking about personal affront, not physical attack. He's talking about insult. He's not talking about physical violence. And his point is, when your dignity is assaulted, don't insist on your rights. Don't take them to court for that. Absorb the offense. In fact, allow them to offend you again.

Someone humiliates you or slanders you, don't make them pay in court. That's the point. Instead, extend a generosity of spirit that goes beyond your rights.

Our dignity. Secondly, Jesus goes to our possessions. Verse 40 and verse 42. If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

Now, under Jewish law, you could sue someone for their inner garment, their tunic, but not their outer garment, their cloak. The cloak was supposed to be almost sacrosanct. It had a kind of a sense of the family or the name. You carried your name, as it were, in this garment. The cloak apparently could be taken as surety for borrowing, but it had to be returned at nightfall because it was also used as bed clothing as well as day clothing. The cloak was a very important thing, which is why you couldn't actually be sued for your cloak. And Jesus says, when you're sued for your tunic, don't just hand your tunic over, but give them your cloak as well.

Meet their demand with super generosity. Shock them. They're going for this. You go have it all. Take it all. It's the old preachers love it, don't they? The Les Miserables illustration. Old, what was his name? Jean Valjean. He steals the silver from the bishop, and the whole point is that he gets caught, and he's brought back by the gendarme, and the bishop greets him, and he says, oh, Jean, I'm glad to see you. You only took the candlesticks. Why didn't you take the—or you only took the forks. Why didn't you take the candlesticks as well? And it's a great illustration of grace, isn't it? But the point is that he is met with super generosity. You wanted to take that? I'll give you everything. If they want your tunic, give them your cloak as well. It's the same idea with the beggar in verse 42. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Now, again, Jesus is not insisting that you empty your bank account for the guy out the front of the co-op, with his little cup. And look, how best to treat those who are begging around London is another question. That's not what's in view here. Jesus is, however, pressing us towards a generosity of heart that trumps a selfish, this is mine, this is my stuff, that kind of mindset. He wants us to sit light to what we have. He wants us to be prepared to be generous.

[ 11 : 19 ] Give me your tunic. Take my cloak. Give me whatever. Do you know what? I'll give you even more. Boys and girls, what he's saying here is if your brother or sister asks you for one of your

sweets, you say, yes, in fact, have two. It's possible with your toys. And you say, would you like to play with these ones as well? These are my favorite. Share. At the dinner table, boys and girls, would you, you know, it's all sitting there, the last few bits and pieces, and you think, you've got your eye on it, and you think to yourself, I would love that. But actually, you say to your siblings, would you like the last absolutely gorgeous, unbelievably delicious-looking piece of dessert? Please have it.

It's not a grasping mentality. It's a generosity. That's what he's getting at. Christians should not be controlled by their possessions. Our culture is creaking under the weight of people whose stuff governs their hearts. Not so for the Christian. This is where the principle of generosity, I think, really bites for us. Are there things that you have that if they were asked of you, you couldn't give them up? Possessions, things that you own, that if they were asked of you, you couldn't let them go. We'll see the deeper significance of this when we get into chapter 6. But the way of the kingdom is to say, have it. Take it. It doesn't have any hold on me. Have it.

Our dignity, our possessions, then. Thirdly, Jesus addresses our liberty. Verse 41, if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. The occupying Roman army of the day had the right to conscript people to assist them. It's interesting.

That's why Simon of Cyrene could be forced to carry Jesus' cross. The Romans had the right to do that, to get people to do things for them. The Jews hated it because it was a humiliating reminder that they were a subjugated people. But Jesus says that when they command you to walk a mile, walk another one as well. No soldier has the right to insist on that.

[14:09] But when you do it, you're showing them that you serve a different leader. You're showing them that his command is only part of the piece for you. Now, to do this for anyone would have been remarkable, but to do it for the Romans, to do it for the enemy, would be unheard of. He's preparing us for the next command in 43 to 48. Now, again, this doesn't mean that you simply roll over every time the state reaches beyond their jurisdiction. But the point is that Jesus wants us to do the unexpected. He wants us to go the extra mile because he wants us to show those around us that we serve a different king, that our authority is a higher authority, and we follow that authority because we belong to a different kingdom.

This is the greater righteousness that Jesus calls for. France, in his commentary on Matthew, says, quote, In place of the principle of retribution, Jesus sets non-resistance. In place of defense of legal rights, he sets uncalculating generosity. In place of concern for oneself, he sets concern for the other.

Now, I get that that sounds great. It sounds really nice. It sounds very, like, lovely, warm-hearted thing to say, but it's not realistic. It's not realistic, is it? Especially not in our current culture.

Sociologists have observed how a shift in Western approaches to parenting have created a narcissism that wasn't there in our parents' or grandparents' generations. In psychology, now, there's a thing called the narcissism test where they read people's statements.

In studies, they've read people's statements and asked if they apply to them. Do these statements apply to you? To what degree do you think this statement describes you? Statements like, I like to be the center of attention. I show off if I get the chance because I'm extraordinary.

Somebody should write a biography about me. And apparently, the average narcissism score has risen by 30% in the last 20 years. I think somebody should write a biography of me. The idea of saying, yes, I think that's entirely reasonable, it's astonishing. David Brooks, the New York journalist, in his book, *The Road to Character*, describes how this kind of thing has played out. Quote, as I looked around the popular culture, I kept finding the same messages everywhere.

[16:47] Does this sound familiar? You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés. Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course.

You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self-trust. End quote. Now, that explains Charles Taylor's observation, doesn't it? Because this self-centered perspective is in the back of our mind, it's the music that... it's the lift, the elevator music that's playing in the back of our minds all the time. It shapes everything about how we see the world. But as positive a message as that sounds, don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. As great as that sounds, as positive as it might seem, it is the cause of almost every emotional problem that we face.

Anxiety to achieve. Because actually when it comes down to it, we're not so great. Depression when we fail. Because we tried to chart our own course and actually it didn't go so well. Insecurity. Because we realize that those limits can't be surpassed. We realize that we are fragile. Vanity. All of these things wrapped up together. But you know what, perhaps the biggest problem that this kind of backing track to our lives has created is that it has created a sense of entitlement. If you think you're special, if you think that someone should, if you're seriously thinking that someone should write a biography about you because you're so great at like 22 or whatever age. You know, all my great achievements at 22. Well, that comes with expectations. If you're super special, you expect people to treat you special, like you're special.

And what comes from that is that you don't then, by definition, you don't have the generosity of spirit that Jesus demands. Embracing a generosity that reaches beyond our rights, in a culture that is neurotic about rights is almost impossible. Almost.

[ 19 : 24 ] But the gospel of Jesus Christ makes it possible. Jesus is preaching this sermon on the way to Jerusalem. And what will happen there? He will have his dignity offended, he will have his possessions stripped, and he will have his liberty denied in the most extreme way possible. He will have his liberty in the most extreme way possible, nailed to a cross, and executed unjustly, the perfect Son of God executed as a sinner.

The heart of the Christian message is that he does this in order to bear the punishment from God that our sins deserved in our place. That is the heart of the Christian faith.

And we put our faith in him in order that our sin is dealt with. We can't fix our sin ourselves. It is because he had his dignity offended, his possessions stripped, and his liberty denied, as he is nailed to the cross for our sins that we might be put right with God. It is through our faith in him that we are then brought into this kingdom that's being talked about here, that we are adopted as his people.

What that means is that our acceptance before God is not on the basis of anything that we have done, and that means it can't be lost through anything that we have done. We are secure. There is a banner over our lives that says, no condemnation. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We have been accepted by the King of the universe, and whatever happens then, he will find in our favor.

Now, what that reality does is it changes our perspective on absolutely everything, because when somebody grasps this reality, they can embrace the kind of generosity of spirit that Jesus is talking about.

[ 21 : 19 ] When our dignity is offended, we don't need to retaliate, because we have our vindication in Christ. Jesus would do this himself when he was insulted on the cross, remaining silent in the face of his accusers. He didn't need to justify himself. He trusted himself and his vindication to the Father.

Father, surely we can do the same. When it comes to our possessions, knowing that all that we have comes from God, everything, from every breath that we take to everything that's in our cupboard, comes from him. When we realize that, and when we realize that all we need in life is our relationship with him, the relationship that he's given us, well, it does two things. It helps us grasp that God gives us what we have in order to share it with others. So, when someone says, can I have that? You say, yeah, have more. And it frees us from the love of things so that we can say that, have more.

It frees us from the clinging influence of possessions. It frees us from those things that get their claws into our hearts. And then when it comes to our liberty, we know that in Christ, we have a freedom that transcends every other restriction. Freedom from bondage to sin liberates beyond anything else. Freedom from bondage of sin liberates us so radically that we can willingly give up our freedoms for the sake of others. In the Lord Jesus Christ, we are so transformed that we will do what it takes to win others by love rather than retaliate on the basis of our rights.

You know as well as I do that you cannot work up this generosity in your own strength. It takes a new man, it takes a new woman empowered by the Holy Spirit to be able to live this kind of life. But this is what we have through faith in Christ. That's what you have if you're in the Lord Jesus.

[ 23 : 30 ] And it's that truth, it's that gospel that underpins our ability then to follow the next impossible command as well. Look at verse 43. You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. The first heart quality is

generosity that reaches beyond our rights. The second heart quality is love that reaches beyond your friends.

That's what he's calling us to, a love that reaches beyond your friends. Once again, Jesus addresses a misinterpretation of the law. In this case, it's the law of neighbor love in Leviticus 19, verse 18. Now, although it didn't actually say it anywhere in the Bible, the scribes and the Pharisees reasoned that if they were to love their neighbor, it followed that they could then hate their enemies. Love your neighbor? Well, I've only got so much love to give, so I'll give it to them, and then I'll hate my enemies. They knew the Psalms that spoke of destroying the nation's enemies, and they knew that they saw that then as their permission. Well, the Psalms talk about the destruction of the nation, God's enemies, so I can act the same way towards mine. And of course, remember the story of the Good Samaritan, there was a lot of chat there about what was required to qualify someone as a neighbor, because they knew they needed to love neighbors, but there were people they just didn't want to love. The problem with the teachers was their desire to limit their responsibilities and make the law suit them. But here Jesus pushes the radical character of the kingdom to its climax.

Don't just love your neighbor, but, 44, love your enemies. Love your enemies. And pray for those who persecute you. It's an outrageous demand, until we see the grounds of the command. Verse 45, So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good. He sends rain on the just and on the unjust. This is a very particular case of like Father, like Son. We were at a wedding last week in our family, and we only knew the bride. This is always a bit odd at a wedding. You don't know anybody else. And it was in Italy. I don't speak any Italian.

We're meeting people and greeting them, and it was always, it was a lovely time. It was very awkward. However, when I was meeting people, I would say, and these are my children, and several of them said the same thing. Yes, I can see. I can tell. It's my son. I can tell. I see the family likeness.

Yes. That's what it should be like for the Christian. When people see the way that we love others, it should bear the family likeness.

[ 26 : 26 ] Like a heavenly Father who takes the initiative to love the unlovely. Like an older brother who, bearing the perfect likeness of the Father, pursued his enemies all the way from heaven to a world in rebellion against him. And who, when his enemies sought to destroy him, hanging in agony and weakness on the cross, he loved them, praying, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. It is a love that is not controlled by the object. It has nothing to do with the person being loved. It is a love that is controlled by his will, a will that is bent on emulating his Father.

That's what the Lord Jesus is doing. Is there anywhere where the countercultural nature of Christ's kingdom is more stark in our day?

Loving those who aren't like us, or who reject us, or who despise us, giving our time, our energy, our resources to people like that. This is the high point of our distinctiveness in our culture.

Surely, everyone loves their friends. Everyone loves those who are like them. Verse 46, For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same. And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same. There is great friendship and affection amongst some of the worst human beings in our world.

[ 28 : 02 ] Organized crime, very close with each other. But when you give yourself to pray for those who persecute you, when you keep serving with generosity those who make your life difficult, when you make sacrifices in order to bring the gospel to people who are not like you, this makes people sit up and take note. Why would you do such a thing?

Like father, like son. It's how we behave in this family. And this is where Jesus concludes. Not just verses 43 to 48, but this whole section on greater righteousness that we started back in verse 21. You, therefore, he says, verse 48, you, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. The Christian's lifestyle is to be different from other people's because it flows from the character of God. The word that Matthew uses here, the Greek teleos doesn't mean moral purity. When he's referring to you be perfect, the word is not morally pure, although that is true of God. But when it is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it means undivided, complete, whole, which of course is entirely consistent with this theme that runs all the way through the sermon about wholehearted devotion, because that is what God is like.

In distinction from the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus' followers are to have an undivided heart, not one thing on the outside and another on the inside, but a wholehearted orientation towards God. That's what he's saying. You, therefore, must be wholehearted as your heavenly father is wholehearted. Generosity that reaches beyond your rights. Love that reaches beyond your friends. I can see the family likeness. Let's pray together.