

In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus ruled out retaliation or any other action based solely on convenience or personal safety. Believers are not to act in terms of what benefits them the most, but are to live for others and for the glory of God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31; Ro. 14:19-21; 1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:4-5, 6-8).

If passive non-resistance is difficult, what follows is even harder - actively expressing love toward our enemies.

5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

5:44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

5:45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

5:46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

5:47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

“Love your neighbor” is a quote from Leviticus 19:18. “‘Neighbor’ is a frequent OT term for a fellow member of the covenant community, and the associated terms (“your kin,” “one of your people” [in Lev. 19:16-18]) leave no doubt that that is the meaning here” (France, 224). The people heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” but they were hearing falsely for the OT nowhere says to hate your enemy (contrast Exo. 23:4-5, cf. Prov. 24:17; 25:21).

As France says,

But while the additional words [i.e., “hate your enemy”] draw a corollary which the OT text does not state, they represent what would be naturally understood to be the counterpart to its intended application, whereas Jesus’ contrasting statement goes far beyond the purview of Lev 19:18 and introduces a concept of indiscriminating love which cannot easily be derived from the Pentateuch at all. The key (as the lawyer of Luke 10:29 rightly perceived) lies in the meaning of “neighbor”. For most contemporary interpreters the term was restrictive, leaving non-neighbors outside the command to love; hence the popular edition “and hate your enemy”. The general use of “neighbor” in the OT suggests that Lev 19:18 has this restrictive sense, applying specifically to fellow members of the Israelite community [e.g., in Lev. 19:16-18 “neighbor” is synonymous with “your people”, “your fellow countryman” and “the sons of your people” -- TK]. For Jesus, however, the love of neighbor was broadly inclusive, as is spelled out in vv. 44-47 and more graphically in Luke 10:30-37. . . The rhetorical questions of vv. 46-47 therefore sum up the thrust of all these examples of the greater righteousness: it is to live on a level above that of ordinary decent people, to draw your standards of conduct not from what everyone else is doing, but from your heavenly Father. This teaching of Jesus on the love of enemies formed one of the most distinctive traits of the early Christian movement, and has been widely influential ever since (France 223, 224).

In verse 45 Jesus demonstrates that even God loves His enemies for He gives rain and sun to both the righteous and the unrighteous alike.

We find that the Bible asserts that the providential agency of God is exercised over all the operations of nature. This is asserted with regard to the ordinary operations of physical laws: the motion of the heavenly bodies, the succession of the seasons, the growth and decay of the productions of the earth; and the falling of the rain, hail, and snow. It is He who guides Arcturus in his course, who makes the sun to rise, and the grass to grow. These events are represented as due to the omnipresent agency of God **and are determined, not by chance, nor by necessity, but by his will**. Paul says (Acts 14:17), that God “left not himself without witness” even among the heathen, “in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” Our Lord says (Matt. 5: 45), God “makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” He clothes “the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven” (Matt. 6:30). (Hodge, Systematic Theology, I, 587)

Note Hodge’s important point: the impartial goodness of God evidenced in His giving the sun, rain, and fruitful seasons to all inhabitants of the earth is not something that happens by chance, nor is it something that God must do, rather, it is an act of God’s will. This means that God is deliberately and consciously acting in goodness toward His enemies.

Jesus takes it a step further by deducing that God’s willful care of His creation, including the care of His enemies, is evidence of God’s love for them. He then concludes, if God loves His enemies, then we who are *His* children should reflect the character of our Father by loving our enemies as well.

Some take “Love your enemies . . . that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” to mean that you become a child of God by loving your enemies, others take it to mean that by loving your enemies you prove that you really are a child of God.

Three considerations demonstrate that the latter view is correct:

- 1) No one can become a child of God or enter the kingdom of heaven by their own efforts.
- 2) Concepts of sonship support the idea that a son’s behavior proves who his father is.
- 3) The context shows that our behavior comes from who we are, not vice versa.

1. No one can become a child of God or enter the kingdom of heaven by their own efforts.

Sonship is something that happens by either birth or adoption, neither of which is achieved by the will of the child.

Secondly, their status as children of God is already implied in verse 48 where Jesus called God “*your* heavenly Father.”

Lastly, the Sermon on the Mount was heard as a single message. This presupposes that whoever is hearing Matthew 5:43-48 has also heard Matthew 5:3. There Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (see notes on Matt 5:3). In other words, we should assume that the reader already knows that people cannot enter the kingdom of heaven by the moral resources that they bring, for poverty of spirit means that they have none!

The Christian life doesn't start by measuring up. It starts by realizing that we don't measure up. As Piper says, it starts by recognizing,

We are poverty-stricken, helpless as a child, and sin-sick in need of a Great Physician. Then we hear the gospel news that Jesus "came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45); and we hear the free offer that by trusting Him our sins will be forgiven, God will be our Father, and the power of the kingdom will come into our lives, and we will have the help we need to live out the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. (John 15:5). We are grafted into the vine by faith in the all-satisfying promises of Christ. And we abide there by faith—drawing on his power and his enabling. So the fruit we produce, like loving our enemies, is not produced in our own strength, but by the strength of the vine. (Piper)

2. Concepts of sonship support the idea that a son's behavior proves who his father is.

In a pre-industrial, agrarian, hand-craft society 95-98% of all sons would do what their fathers did and 95-98% of all the daughters would do what their mothers did, so children were identified by their parents' work. This would mean that if I were a stone mason – even without meeting my father – people would assume that he was a stone mason, too. I could be identified as my father's son by the work I did. As a result, "sonship" started to be used as a term that gave a context for someone's behavior.

Jesus uses sonship in this way in both a positive sense and in a negative sense.

Positively, in Matthew 5:9 He says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." God is the supreme peacemaker. When we make peace we are acting like God.

The reason we shall be called sons of our Father is because our "vocation" of peacemaking is the same as His; sons do what their father does.

Likewise, in Matthew 5:44-45: "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." By not showing partiality toward our enemies, we act like God and demonstrate that we are His children. Once again, the evidence that we are our Father's children is based on us doing the same kind of work that He does.

Negatively, in John 8:44 Jesus says of the leaders who wanted to kill Him, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.” This is not saying that they are literal children of the devil as if Satan had a relationship with a woman and a child was born; it is merely a way of describing the source of one’s actions on a functional level – you act like your parent.

But there is another reason why we should exhibit god-like behavior – we have been born of the Spirit and have the same “DNA” as our Father.

God acts in accordance with His nature. He is good because His essence is good.

Hodge is once again helpful. He says,

The primary idea of goodness, is the essential, not the creative, will of God. The divine will in its essence is infinite love, mercy, patience, truth, faithfulness, rectitude, spirituality, and all that is included in holiness, which constitutes the inmost nature of God. The holiness of God, therefore, neither precedes His will, nor follows it, but is His will itself. The good is not a law for the divine will (so that God wills it because it is good); neither is it a creation of His will (so that it becomes good because He wills it); but it is the nature of God from everlasting to everlasting (Hodge, Systematic Theology, III, 257).

In other words, the goodness of God comes from who He is. God does not try to be good; He is good by nature.

If we are His children, then we possess His nature and we should display the same goodness that God does toward others (see also 3c below). This means that loving our enemies does not come through self-transformation, but is the natural outcome of having the same genetic characteristics of our Father. Life comes first, behavior second.

Matthew 7:16–17 uses plants to illustrate that fruit is the outgrowth of a tree’s nature. Jesus says, “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit.”

You cannot produce the fruit of love in order to become a good tree. You have to become a good tree in order to produce the fruit of love. Becoming a child of God and being transformed on the inside—becoming a good tree—precedes and enables love, not vice versa.

Both concepts of sonship support the idea that loving our enemies *proves we are sons of God*; it doesn’t make us His children.

3. *The context shows that our behavior comes from who we are, not vice versa.*

The final reasons to reject the idea that you become a child of God by loving your enemies are in the Sermon on the Mount itself.

a) Matthew 5:16 – “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

In this verse Jesus tells His disciples that God IS their Father. Furthermore, when people see the good works of the disciples (like loving their enemies), they give glory to the Father, not the disciples. In other words, people recognize the family resemblance between God and His children by the children's actions. For that reason, they give glory to God.

b) Matthew 7:11–12 – “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Once more Jesus tells his disciples that God is their Father, even though He also recognizes that they are imperfect (He calls them evil). Then in verse 12 He draws a conclusion from the principle of “like Father-like son.” “Therefore” treat people the same way you want them to treat you. In other words, because we want our Father to give us what is good when we ask of Him, we should “treat people the same way” by giving them what is good when they ask of us. Our actions are the result of the Father's goodness to us, not the payment we make to become his children.

So when Jesus says, " love your enemies . . . that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven," He does not mean that loving our enemies earns us the right to be children of God. We cannot earn “child status.” We must be either born into a family or adopted into one – neither of which is our choice.

When we don't love our enemies, what does that tell us about ourselves?

Jesus has already defined “enemies” as those “who insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you” because of your faith in Christ (Matt.5:11, 44).

According to verses 46 and 47, if we don't love our enemies we are acting no differently than the lowest standard of society. In Jewish terminology of Jesus' day, this would mean behaving like a tax-gatherer or Gentile, rather than a member of God's family.

The Roman Empire used a taxation system where they specified how much tax should be collected from a given area. They appointed someone to collect the tax who in turn appointed men under him. Every man was responsible for a certain amount, but anything he collected above that could be kept. The potential for bribery and corruption was enormous and therefore the tax-gatherer was hated.

The Gentile was someone who most Jews saw as outside of God's mercy. They didn't know God and they didn't care to. All who came into contact with Gentiles (even if a Gentile's shadow fell upon them) were ceremonially unclean.

Jesus was illustrating to His listeners that even those people whom they despised were able to love people who loved them. If their love was no better than this what makes them any different than they are? A disciple of Christ is to be extraordinary, altogether different from the world.

What does loving our enemies look like?

The context itself suggests three ways to love our enemies.

1) Pray for them: “pray for those who persecute you.” (5:44)

Prayer for your enemies is one of the deepest forms of love, because it means that you have to really want something good to happen to them. You might do nice things for your enemy without any genuine desire that things go well with them. But prayer for them is in the presence of God who knows your heart, and prayer is interceding with God on their behalf. It may be for their conversion. It may be for their repentance. It may be that they would be awakened to the enmity in their hearts. But the prayer Jesus has in mind here is always for their good (Piper).

2) Meet their practical needs. That’s what God does when He “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (5:45)

In Romans 12:20-21 Paul says, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink . . . do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

3) Do something as simple and gracious as greeting them: "if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others?" (5:47) Greeting your non-brothers may seem utterly insignificant in the context of threatening and killing, but Jesus means for this text to apply to all of life.

In sum: be perfect as God is perfect

All that Jesus said to this point could be summed up in verse 48, "Be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect." We are to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:14-16), loving, because God is love (1 Jn.4:7, 8), and perfect because God is perfect.

Of course, we should not assume that Jesus means that we can be equal to God. Rather, the “perfection” is a resemblance. “We are said to be *perfect, as He is perfect*, when we aim at the same object” (Calvin, Commentary), when we give free and pure kindness without any expectation of personal gain, or when we show goodness toward others who are ungrateful or hostile toward us.

This is how our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

Conclusion:

The Sermon on the Mount and the command to love our enemies isn’t an isolated teaching of Jesus, but is a truth that was exemplified in His life. Jesus consistently sought the poor and the helpless and the sick. When the religious leaders scoffed at His eating with tax gatherers and sinners (Lk. 15:2), Jesus told them the story of the prodigal son which spoke of the Father’s love for His wayward son. Jesus didn’t eat with sinners because He liked sin, He ate with them because He possessed the love of God which welcomed home the poor, the helpless, and the diseased.