

SIMPLE FAITH

Simple Advice to the Selfish and Strong-Willed

Matthew 5:38–48



LET'S BEGIN HERE

What stubborn people we can be! Selfish to the core, we want our way, not someone else's . . . and certainly not God's. Shortsighted, we see the immediate and the obvious, not the ultimate and the hidden. Easily irritated and impatient, our first reaction when taken advantage of is to retaliate, to establish a defensive posture and not give anyone an inch. Those efforts only intensify when faced with an adversary. Then we aren't satisfied with simply standing our ground and being determined . . . getting even becomes our agenda.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered revolutionary, even strange, advice for His people. Without pulling His punches, Jesus addressed the very best way to handle sensitive situations with those who threaten our personal rights. He offered countercultural counsel and dared us to obey. In place of retaliation, release . . . instead of hate, love . . . don't get even, pray.

It's with this counsel in Jesus' sermon that most people have their greatest struggles.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Our Dog-Eat-Dog Mentality

Many in our society live by some strange and damaging rules today.

- "I have my rights."
- "Do unto others before they do unto you."
- "Shoot first and ask questions later."
- "I don't get mad . . . I get even."

Perhaps no generation has ever lived where the words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount stand in greater contrast to our environment.



Quotable

*Release your right
to cling to comforts.*

*Nothing wrong
with having
comforts—just
don't cling to them.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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2. Christ's Countercultural Counsel (Matthew 5:38–48)

Once again in this magnificent sermon, Jesus stood against the prevailing wisdom of His culture. But His words carry an impact far beyond the confines of first-century Israel. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount should continue to have a direct impact on our actions today. The Lord's words in Matthew 5:38–48 prompt us to ask: *How should we react in the face of insults, injuries, and enemies?* Jesus therefore encouraged His hearers to *release instead of resist, love instead of hate, and be perfect, not merely human.*

What did Jesus call His audience to release? He called us to give up our rights to being treated without insult (Matthew 5:39), to comfort (5:40), to setting our own personal schedules (5:41), and to own and keep our possessions (5:42). This teaching flies in the face of the values and aims of so much of our culture these days. Of course, this teaching offered a strong counter in Jesus' day as well.

Who, then, did Jesus call His audience to love? In short, everyone, including enemies (5:44). Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors does not imply agreement with the actions of those people. Rather, it suggests that no matter what a person does to us, he or she can expect the love of God to inform each of our actions.

How did Jesus call us to be perfect? The command to perfection is an issue of situating ourselves toward perfection. While we know we cannot achieve anything close to complete perfection, we can strive to be like the Father, modeling ourselves after His deeds and His character. Furthermore, Jesus revealed Himself that we might have an even clearer portrait of what godly living looks like.



A CLOSER LOOK

Being Perfect

Read Matthew 5:48. Jesus closed this section of His sermon with an exhortation: "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Anyone who heard Him speak that command then or who reads it today understands that true perfection will always remain out of reach this side of heaven. So what did Jesus mean when He called His followers to be perfect?

Jesus' command to perfection is an expectation that we situate ourselves *toward* perfection. While we know we cannot achieve anything close to complete perfection, we can strive to be like the Father, modeling ourselves after His deeds and His character as revealed in His Word. Furthermore, Jesus revealed Himself so we might have an even clearer portrait of what God's kind of living looks like.



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LET'S LIVE IT

We can bring the lessons of this passage to bear upon our lives in at least three ways:

- *With your family, release your rights!* Conflicts occur in families. That inevitable fact of life makes releasing our rights an all-important step in attaining continued unity among our closest relatives.
- *With your friends, look beyond the wrongs!* We sometimes have a tendency to highlight the wrongs in our friends' lives. Instead, focus on what those friends are doing right.
- *With your enemies, fulfill your role!* Those who've gone out of their way to become our enemies have the need of someone in their lives who will live well despite their antagonistic behavior.

Consider your family members. What rights do you need to release in order to foster unity among your relatives?



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