

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Arrival: A Study of Matthew 1–7

STUDY SIXTEEN

Shocking Advice to the Selfish and Strong-Willed

Matthew 5:38–48

*When we make Jesus' words our lifestyle, we will be like our heavenly Father.
What is the Father like? He is loving, full of mercy, and grace.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WHEN the apostle Paul, by the Holy Spirit's power, gazed down the corridor of time and viewed the state of the world's future, he set his eyes on a disturbing scene.

In the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. (2 Timothy 3:1–4)

The apostle's predictions are today's headlines, aren't they? They describe our culture with sobering accuracy. Thankfully, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stands against the tide of moral decline and invites His followers to join His countercultural movement. His teaching about life in the kingdom of God is downright revolutionary!

In His final instructions in Matthew 5, Jesus reaches the apex of His countercultural strategy. In Matthew 5:21–37, He teaches us what *not* to do. Now, in Matthew 5:38–48, He teaches us what to do—*love our enemies*.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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Matthew 5:38–48

Commentator John Stott reflects on this ultimate manifestation of kingdom living:

Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling.¹

And, we might add, at no time in history is the need greater for Christ's revolutionary love.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

The apostle Paul warned us not to allow the world to squeeze us into its mold (Romans 12:2). When we love our enemies, we not only resist the mold, we break it! Pray the following prayer, as you seek to understand and follow Jesus' teaching.

Father, I am surrounded by the dog-eat-dog mentality of the world in which I live, and I need Your otherworldly perspective. Teach me to love all people as You love them. Help me understand Jesus' words and in the power of Your grace change my world with His love. In Jesus' name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

As you read [Matthew 5:38–48](#), imagine hearing Jesus' teaching in person, as though you were one of His Jewish followers fettered by Roman rule. These Jews hated the Romans for their pagan practices, heavy taxes, and brutal treatment. Against this backdrop of foreign oppression, the passage holds even deeper meaning. Notice the two sections in which Jesus gives instructions on how to respond to a person who does evil to us (Matthew 5:38–42) and how to treat an enemy (5:43–48).



Observation: Release Not Resist, Love Not Hate

In the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, it's important to observe central themes, repeated words, phrases, or patterns.² Look for the ways Jesus contrasts our usual reactions to evildoers and enemies with the responses of those who live by Christ's principle of love.



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Response to an Evildoer—Matthew 5:38–42

What Old Testament law did Jesus quote in *Matthew 5:38*? Read the cross-references in your Bible to find the verses Jesus may have been quoting. What is the underlying principle on which this law is based?

This principle was woven into Israel's legal fabric as a way for judges to end a dispute without it escalating. Once the punishment was paid, the case was closed. However, while the law of retaliation may have balanced the scales of justice, it fell short of Christ's higher law.

What four illustrations did Jesus give in which the injured person released his or her rights of payback (*Matthew 5:39–42*)? Notice the verbs: *do not resist*, *offer*, *give*, *carry*, and *don't turn away*. What heart attitudes did Jesus imply were motivating the person to return a blessing for a curse?

What do you do when ugly things are said about you? Let it glance off you. Overlook it, ignore it. Look past it. We turn the other cheek when we refuse to take it personally and refuse to retaliate. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Response to an Enemy—Matthew 5:43–48

What Old Testament law did Jesus quote in *Matthew 5:43*? Read the cross-references in your Bible to find the verses Jesus may have been quoting. Note: you won't find any references for "hate your enemy" . . . *because that statement is not in the Bible!* Jewish teachers added this phrase to the law and encouraged hating enemies, especially the Romans.

In *5:45*, Jesus compared showing love to all people with what benevolent actions by the heavenly Father?

What comparisons did Jesus make in *5:46–47*?



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What motivations did Jesus give for loving our enemies in these verses?

It's not about hating our enemies. Hate never accomplished anything except to make us more angry and bitter. Jesus doesn't say, "Love the way your enemies live" or "Support them when they are doing wrong." He says, "Love them as people." We can do that.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Love and Limits

In the interpretation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we seek to understand what Jesus was saying . . . and what He wasn't saying. By instructing us to cool the urge to retaliate, Jesus never implied that we condone evil behavior or forbid the administration of justice. He taught us to gauge our *personal* response not by the "eye for an eye" standard but by the higher standard of love.

Read pages 103–104 in Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*, as well as the following explanation of Matthew 5:38–42 by commentator John Stott. In the space below, write down your understanding of how love guides our responses to evildoers.

[The] principle is love, the selfless love of a person who, when injured, refuses to satisfy himself by taking revenge, but studies instead the highest welfare of the other person and of society, and determines his reactions accordingly. He will certainly never hit back, returning evil for evil, for he has been entirely freed from personal animosity. Instead, he seeks to return good for evil. So he is willing to give to the uttermost—his body, his clothing, his service, his money—in so far as these gifts are required by love.³



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Love not only guides; it sets limits. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is to confront wrong. “True love, caring for both the individual and society, takes action to deter evil and promote good.”⁴ How might a follower of Jesus respond in a loving way to wrongdoing, without taking revenge or resorting to retaliation against the wrongdoer?

Just as children naturally follow in their parents’ footsteps, we act most like our heavenly Father—and *unlike* the world—when we shower grace on our enemies. What did Jesus mean, “But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)? Consult Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s commentary, pages 104–105 or, for additional insight, [Constable’s Notes](#) at [netbible.org](#).

Our lives beam with godliness when we return good for evil. Paul elaborated this theme in his letter to the Romans. Let’s look closer at Paul’s teaching as it correlates with the teaching of Jesus.



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Correlation: Paul on Retaliation

Romans 12 goes hand-in-hand with the Sermon on the Mount and is an inspired commentary on Jesus' teaching. Read [Romans 12:14–21](#) and write down Paul's line of reasoning regarding Jesus' teaching on working for peaceful relationships, releasing our rights to revenge, and loving our enemies.

According to Paul, why is doing good to those who have wronged us like heaping “burning coals of shame on their heads” (Romans 12:20)?

How can we apply Jesus' teaching on loving our enemies instead of taking revenge? Certainly not in our own strength. As we wrap up our study, let's look to our Lord for the resources we need to obey His law of love.

The Lord Jesus Christ releases His power through you so that you can forgive. You can ignore an insult. You can go the extra mile. You can give up your rights. People can say things against you that are absolutely untrue, and you don't have to set the record straight. You don't have to do that because the Lord is at work on your behalf.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Application: Responding to Christ's Call to Love

Following Jesus' teaching on loving our enemies is the ultimate test of godliness and spiritual maturity, and it is only possible through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Christ.

Have you experienced a similar situation to the ones Jesus illustrated? Perhaps someone slapped you in the face with an insult, threatened to take something from you, demanded you do a humbling task, or asked something from you that you didn't want to give up. What is your situation?

Yield yourself to the Spirit and invite Christ to guide your words and actions. Write a prayer as you release your rights and trust God to make things right in His time.

What can you do today to follow Jesus' teaching on nonretaliation? Is there someone with whom you can share your journey, who can support you and pray for you as you take steps to love your enemy?



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Throughout history, many godly men and women have walked Jesus' way of love. William Wilberforce patiently endured slanderous "slaps" as he crusaded to abolish the slave trade in England. In a Nazi concentration camp, Corrie Ten Boom prayed for her captors even when they cruelly mistreated her and took the life of her dear sister, Betsy.

Will loving your enemies be easy? Christian history teaches us no. But the struggle will transform you into the image of your heavenly Father. He is our model of grace toward enemies, as Paul declared, "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8).



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I pray for the wisdom and courage to embrace the evildoer while standing up to the evil. To resist the pull of the world to pay back evil for evil. To have more concern for people than for my own rights. Give me the love I lack and empower me to do what only Jesus can do. Fill me with Your Spirit and encourage me with the presence of Christ, for it is in His name that I pray, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 103.
2. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
3. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)*, 107.
4. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)*, 108.

