

EXEGETICAL PAPER: MATTHEW 5:38-48

Introduction

It is Sunday afternoon. You and your family have just returned from a wonderful time of corporate worship at a nearby Baptist church where an excellent class on the Gospel of Matthew is being taught. Your young and talented, foreign-educated Sunday school teacher just completed his lesson on Matthew 5:33-37, along with giving you a preview of that dreaded passage wherein Christians are told to turn the other cheek. “Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.” It is so unnatural that you have not stopped thinking about it. You, your wife, and multiple children have now sat down to eat another scrumptious batch of haggis. As you are about to shovel into your mouth the first big bite, a deranged man with a Bowie knife kicks in your front door and tells you that he is going to kill your beloved. He quickly walks toward her. You notice your Binelli twelve-gauge autoloader¹ leaning in the corner next to you. What should you do?²

This sensational scenario is not meant to be only a literary hook. It is a frequently occurring, deadly serious matter about which more Christians need to think since human life is on the line. Some Christians and at least one Christian denomination, which *always* appeal to Matthew 5:38-39, teach that you should do nothing. “Non-violence is always the answer to violence,” they say. What would Jesus do? Christians are, after all, supposed to “follow in His steps.”³ To discern what the disciple of the Lord ought to do, the Lord’s words in Matthew 5:38-48 must be rightly interpreted, given their setting in the immediate context of the Sermon on the Mount as well as their place in the larger context of the entire gospel. The rather clear, godly course of action for the above situation will be given later.

¹It is fully loaded for an unloaded gun is simply an expensive stick, unfit for any intended purpose.

²Let us assume the man will not be deterred from his sinful desire by verbal pleading or less-than-mortal restraint measures.

³1 Pet 2:21, NASB

Personal Translation

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you; do not set yourself against an evil person. And whoever slaps you on the right cheek, offer to him the other one also. And whoever desires to sue you and take your shirt, give to him your coat also. And whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.⁴ Give to the one asking you. Do not refuse the one desiring to borrow from you.

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 in order that you may be⁵ sons of your Father who is in heaven. Because He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love (only) those who love you, what reward have you earned? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you warmly greet⁶ only your brothers, what more (than others) are you doing? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, you be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Grammatical Analysis and Exegesis

Jesus’ hearers and Matthew’s readers had heard correctly. Moses had written and taught the law of reciprocation or *lex talionis*.⁷ “Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”⁸ As in the previous four paragraphs of 5:21-37 where Old Testament verses are quoted, Jesus did not here repudiate the law of reciprocity. He could not have since God is the implied subject of the passive verb ἐρρέθη⁹ and Jesus, who is always one with His Father,¹⁰ just said “until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law.”¹¹ What was the purpose of the civil

⁴The Roman μίλιον equals one thousand paces, much less of a distance than a U.S. Customary mile.

⁵Or “show yourselves to be”

⁶Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilber Gingrich [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀσπάζομαι.” “Here denotes more than a perfunctory salutation and requires some such rendering as *spend time in warm exchange*.”

⁷Latin expression meaning “law as retaliation” or “law of retaliation”

⁸Deut 19:21, NASB. See also Exodus 21:24 and Leviticus 24:20.

⁹Almost every aorist passive form of λέγω in the New Testament has God as its subject. See Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43; Romans 9:12, 26; Galatians 3:16, and Rev. 6:11; 9:4.

¹⁰See John 10:30.

¹¹Matt 5:18, NASB

law? It prevented the “excesses of the blood-feud by stating that the legal punishment must not exceed the crime.”¹² Most state courts, including that of the United States of America, abide by a similar law in order to prevent cruel and unusual punishment for crimes. Knowing the propensity of fallen man to want a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense, God ordained and blessed groups of people—government—to oversee and help resolve disputes. The setting of the verse which Jesus quoted is civil jurisprudence.

Why then does Matthew begin verse 39 with the contrastive conjunction *δὲ*? The coordinating conjunction can also be rendered as “now.” It does not always link two opposing statements. While upholding the Torah, Jesus simultaneously rejected interpersonal ethical autonomy which so often manifests itself in ruthless vendettas. This the Law explicitly forbade. It prohibited a person from acting as judge, jury, and executioner. “In no instance did the OT allow an individual to take the law into his own hands and apply it personally.”¹³ The apostles of Jesus taught the same truth. “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”¹⁴ Note it is God who fights for the Israelites when they encounter their enemies.

Jesus grounds His imperative in verse 39 in the Law which He came to fulfill. “*Do not seek revenge* [emphasis mine] or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am Yahweh.”¹⁵ And “Don't say, ‘I will get even for this wrong.’ Wait for Yahweh to handle the matter.”¹⁶ And “Let them turn the other cheek to those who strike them and accept the insults of their enemies.”¹⁷ The context of this verse by Jeremiah (who in many ways is an Old Testament prototype of Jesus) is the affliction of Israel—God's people. Jeremiah previously said in 3:25, “Yahweh is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” He concludes the chapter, writing, “Pay them back, Yahweh, for all the evil they have done. Give them hard and stubborn hearts, and then let your curse fall on them!

¹²R. T. France, *Matthew. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 125.

¹³John F. MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 330.

¹⁴Rom 12:19, NASB

¹⁵Lev 19:18

¹⁶Prov 20:22. See also Proverbs 24:29.

¹⁷Lam 3:30, NLT

Chase them down in your anger, destroying them beneath Yahweh's heavens.”¹⁸ The prophet of old, like Jesus and Paul, placed vengeance in God's hands (Cf. Rom 12:19).

Matthew's inclusion of the unneeded pronoun ἐγὼ in the introductory clause of verse 39 emphasizes Jesus as the *new* messianic law-giver.¹⁹ It must be understood that Jesus did not here contradict or even reinterpret the law of Moses. The contrast in the verb time of verse 38a and 39a (aorist versus present, respectively) supports the view that Jesus did not have a problem with current Jewish interpretation of the Torah. Moreover, that which “was said” in 5:21, 27, 31, 33, and 38 are not interpretations of the Law but direct quotations of it. “The contrast involves not contradiction but transcendence.”²⁰ The Lord simply taught and represented *all* of Moses to the disciples and His wider audience. The scribes and Pharisees failed miserably at this point. Godliness is certainly manifested in justice, at which they sometimes excelled. But it is also shown in mercy.

Justice for God is a necessary attribute. He cannot but be just. Mercy, however, is contingent. His “godness” would be no less if He had never dispensed any mercy to any sinner. But we know through His actions and His word that He had a purpose in manifesting this accidental property, as Aristotle would call it. Redeemed sinners should likewise seek to dispense mercy to the rest of mankind which, like Christians, does not deserve it. Why? We display the character and glory of God when we are merciful. The ability to be merciful is a supernatural response, act, or disposition in which God ought to be seen as the source.

“But I say to you; do not set yourself against [μὴ ἀντιστῆναι] an evil person.”²¹ Matthew's written record of Jesus' discourse permits his audiences to view the mood of ἀντιστῆναι as imperatival.²² The Gospel author's choice of ἀνθίστημι makes sense given the juridical atmosphere of verse 40. The verb means “be in opposition to, set oneself against, oppose” and is sometimes used for “take legal action against.”²³ But did Jesus mean that those

¹⁸Lam 3:64-66, NLT (slightly modified)

¹⁹See Galatians 6:2b.

²⁰W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I-VII. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*, eds. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988), 507.

²¹Matt 5:39a, personal translation. The immediate context of the words does not permit τῷ πονηρῷ to refer to Satan as τοῦ πονηροῦ does in Matthew 6:13.

²²See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 603-604.

²³Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἀνθίστημι.”

who wish to emulate the Father who is in heaven may *never* resist or oppose an evil doer? It cannot without admitting to contradiction in the mind and actions of God. Did not Jesus himself resist or oppose the moneychangers whom He cast out of the temple?²⁴ Satan, who is the epitome of evil, always opposes God's children. Both James and Peter commanded the recipients of their epistles to resist the devil.²⁵ When Peter engaged in evil deeds, Paul "opposed [ἀντέστην²⁶] him to his face."²⁷ The Christian church has by and large approved the practice of Christians serving in the military. Should Christian soldiers never oppose evil-doers? The primary purpose of civil government is to protect its citizenry.²⁸ When interpreting this last pericope of Matthew 5 as well as many other passages in the Sermon on the Mount, we must keep in mind its hyperbolic language (Cf. 5:29-30 and 7:3-4) and the rest of Scripture so that we do not commit the fallacy of hasty generalization.

What then did Jesus mean by 5:39a? Christians are not to relate to others in this world at an interpersonal level according to the justice system of fallen man, always asserting their legal rights. If someone (evil or not) has taken your "eye" you should not always demand his or her "eye." Rather, the actions of the Christian should portray the ethics of the heavenly kingdom's judge—Jesus Christ. He, being about His Father's business, dispensed immeasurable mercy to evildoers. Is Moses' law then to be disregarded? May it never be! Christ's laws of love and mercy did not nullify Moses' laws of justice. No, Jesus' laws surpassed those of Moses. The thing which the law represents—God Himself—must always be considered in our interpretation and application of God's law (Moses' or Jesus') to the myriad of circumstances in which we find ourselves every day.

"And whoever slaps you on the right cheek, offer to him the other one also."²⁹ The Greek term behind "slaps," ῥαπίζω, means "to strike with the open hand, especially in the face, slap."³⁰ David Hill writes, "The Greek verb . . . refers to striking another on the face with the

²⁴See Matthew 21:12.

²⁵See James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9.

²⁶The verb root is the same as that used by Jesus in Matthew 5:39a.

²⁷Gal 2:11

²⁸See Romans 13:1ff.

²⁹Matt 5:39b, personal translation

³⁰Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "ῥαπίζω."

back of the hand, an action which was regarded as a very great insult meriting punishment.”³¹ The physical act is *primarily* a metaphor for egregious insults³² of all types, while including perhaps a measure of physical assault. Unlike Luke, Matthew specifies which cheek is slapped. He probably describes cheek using δεξιάν to clarify that the “slap” here is a colloquialism for a backhanded verbal insult, for a right-handed person normally strikes the left cheek of the person he strikes. Whatever this part of the verse means, “The command to turn the other cheek cannot be understood prosaically.”³³ The “slap” may not be extrapolated to all occasions of personal interaction. Notice what Jesus did not say. “Whoever stabs your wife in the back, turn to the knife wielder her chest as well.” Or “Whoever begins beating you with a baseball bat, allow him to continue beating you until you die.” There are situations which warrant violence, yea demand it, on the part of a Christian. Paul told Timothy “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”³⁴ Family members are commanded to provide the basic necessities of life, such as food, for each other. Should not a family member’s life be considered more valuable than food? A husband, therefore, ought to be willing to give up his own life in order to preserve that of his spouse and vice versa. If an evil person is about to inflict unjustified harm on you or your “neighbor,” turning your cheek to him or her would be morally wrong.³⁵ “A willingness to forgo one’s personal rights, and to allow oneself to be insulted and imposed upon [v. 41], is not incompatible with a firm stand for matters of principle and for the rights of others.”³⁶ At times, Paul exercised his legal rights and defended himself against those who wished him harm.³⁷

Jesus is not teaching absolute non-resistance in verse 39. “The example (for Matthew) amounts to this: If a man insults you, let him insult you again, rather than seek

³¹David Hill. *The Gospel of Matthew. New Century Bible Commentary*, ed. Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 128.

³²See Matthew 5:11 for support for this interpretation.

³³Davies, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew*, 541.

³⁴1 Tim 5:8, NASB

³⁵I can, however, envision a scenario in which it would be permissible, even appropriate, for a Christian to allow himself to be murdered or watch idly as his neighbor was murdered by an evil person. I am thinking of a missionary context where a family has purposely put themselves among a thoroughly pagan people group which they have determined to evangelize.

³⁶France, *Matthew*, 126.

³⁷See Acts 16:37; 22:25, and 25:8-12.

reparation at law.”³⁸ The Christian’s response to ill treatment and insult is the focus of Jesus. He knew His disciples would be persecuted because of Him.³⁹ So He taught them how to respond. “Turning the other cheek symbolizes the nonavenging, nonretaliatory, humble, and gentle spirit that is to characterize kingdom citizens.”⁴⁰

Who might Matthew’s audience have viewed as a role model for Jesus’ teaching in 5:39? Jesus! Isaiah foretold His model behavior.

“Sovereign Yahweh has spoken to me, and I have listened. I have not rebelled or turned away. I offered my back to those who beat me and *my cheeks* [emphasis mine] to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mockery and spitting. Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like a stone, determined to do his will. And I know that I will not be put to shame. He who gives me justice is near. Who will dare to bring charges against me now? Where are my accusers? Let them appear!”⁴¹

And Matthew recorded the Lord’s exemplary behavior later in his Gospel. “Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped [ἐράπισαν] Him.”⁴² Terminological similarity between Isaiah 50:4-9 and Matthew 5:38-42 is striking.

<u>Isaiah 50 Verses</u>	<u>Matthew 5 Verses</u>	<u>Greek Word</u>
8	39	ἀντίστημι
4, 6	42	δίδωμι
6	39	σισαγών
6	42	ἀποστρέφω
8	40	κρίνω
9	40	ἱμάτιον

Matthew’s record of Jesus’ teaching in verse 40 contains the second of four illustrations of how to “not set yourself against an evil person.” Like verse 39, neither can Jesus’ command here be taken literally. A flat-footed reading would have resulted in jail time for the disciples for public indecency. Relinquishing your cloak or coat (ἱμάτια) in order to avoid a legal scene with your neighbor shows the high value which Jesus placed on avoiding

³⁸Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 128.

³⁹See Matthew 10:16-23.

⁴⁰MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 333.

⁴¹Isa 50:5-8

⁴²Matt 26:67, NASB

conflict and retaliation for the sake of higher purposes, e.g., loving and blessing your unbelieving neighbor. The point of the verse: Do not make the ownership of clothing an occasion for Satan to drag Christ's name through the mud and further repel your neighbor. Do extraordinary things to avoid the courts⁴³ of men, knowing your persecution as a Christian is to be expected. Jesus' disciples later learned that they would judge the world in the eschaton (Matt 19:28). Why then during the "already" stage of Christ's kingdom would they appeal to pagan judges to adjudicate a matter? In avoiding court, their behavior would show what they know to be the greater, lasting reality—Christ's kingdom.

Legitimate or not, avoid being sued by evil men by giving up beforehand what your opponent desires. In fact, bless him with more than that which he believes he deserves from you. Jesus never sinned against anyone, yet He gave and still gives many blessing to all persons! We emulate Jesus when we dispense mercy and grace. Who does Matthew later give as a real-world example to Jesus' disciples? This man was slapped by evil men (v. 39) and literally had his clothing taken away, yet He did not retaliate? Jesus again! "And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments (ἱμάτια) among themselves by casting lots."⁴⁴ Jesus walked the talk, perfectly. He endured for eternal purposes what He told His disciples to endure. He called them "to follow in His steps"⁴⁵ for "it is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher."⁴⁶

Having told His disciples to offer the other cheek and to give their coat as well as their shirt, He now tells them to go the extra mile, literally. Verse 41 is the third example of how the child of God may serve those who oppress.⁴⁷ Roman soldiers could legally commandeer non-Romans to carry their personal equipment for one mile.⁴⁸ The state sanctioned this demeaning behavior. At this point in the Sermon, Jesus has told His disciples to give blessings—clothes and service—to unrighteous persons who obviously deserve nothing. Why? Because this is what God does; see verse 45. Jesus set aside His rights and liberties as

⁴³Κριθῆναι, "to sue," has a forensic sense, meaning "to hale you before a court." See Acts 23:6 and 1 Corinthians 6:1.

⁴⁴Matt 27:35, NASB

⁴⁵1 Pet 2:21, NASB

⁴⁶Matt 10:25a, NASB

⁴⁷Ἀγγαρεύσει ("shall force"), from ἄγγαρος, originally meant "a Persian messenger or courier with authority to compel others to assist him." BibleWorks 6.0, Friberg Greek lexicon, s.v. "ἄγγαρεύω."

⁴⁸See footnote four.

the God-Man in order to serve ungrateful God-haters. Amazing. He “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”⁴⁹ Jesus, “although He existed in the form of God”⁵⁰ took the form of a bond-servant and lived the life which His disciples were to live. For the sake of the gospel in which true love and mercy is made no clearer, Christians must die to self and serve others, expecting nothing in return. The Christian’s motivation to love must be to be like his heavenly Father. If it is not, he will cease to love and bless his neighbor as soon as the unworthy incentive ceases; be it the heathen’s conversion, love in return, etcetera.

First-century Jews loathed the rule of pagan Rome. Being told they should carry the weapons which were used to oppress them would have racked their sensibilities. A powerful technique in Jesus’ teaching must not be overlooked. As He did here, He often cast His stories and instruction with characters who would increase the impact: Roman soldier here, Samaritan man in Luke 10, Samaritan woman in John 4, Gentile of the Syrophoenician race in Mark 7, Jewish tax-collector in Matthew 5:46, and a Gentile in 5:47.

In the fourth illustration of how the follower of Jesus is to relate to him who is evil, Matthew gives us Christ’s command in verse 42 to be generous to those in need. Bless your neighbor with the blessings which God has freely given to you. The disciples’ heavenly Father gives what He owns, sun and rain⁵¹ for example, to the unrighteous, knowing that they deserve nothing. This being the case, how could I refuse to give to him who asks of me?

Matthew’s rendition of Jesus’ words helps us understand Luke’s version in the Sermon on the Plain. “Takes away” (αἵροντος) in Luke 6:30b should be understood as borrowing, given Luke 6:30a and Matthew’s clarification of the action.⁵² Jesus alternates His focus in verses 39-42 between self and belongings—two things that sinners easily idolize and put before others. In order to love your neighbor as yourself,⁵³ you must sacrifice: self (v. 39), belongings (v. 40), self (v. 41), belongings (v. 42). The point of the verse: The needs of others must be put before my comfort and convenience. Again the Lord had precedent for His

⁴⁹Matt 20:28, NASB

⁵⁰See Philippians 2:6-7.

⁵¹See Matthew 5:45b.

⁵²This is a case where horizontal reading between Luke and Matthew is very helpful in interpreting Jesus’ teaching.

⁵³See Matthew 19:19 and 22:39.

difficult demands. “Give generously to the poor, not grudgingly, for the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do. There will always be some in the land who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor [Israelites] and with *other* [emphasis mine] Israelites in need.”⁵⁴ As usual, Jesus expanded the beneficiaries of Moses’ command to all persons: Gentiles in general (Matt 5:40), Romans in particular (Matt 5:41), enemies/persecutors (Matt 5:44).

John MacArthur often preaches, “The gospel is the end of you.” The son of the kingdom of heaven must constantly present his life as a living and holy sacrifice (Romans 12:1) if he is to love God and his neighbor. The Christian has died to self and wealth (or mammon).⁵⁵ To always assert one’s rights, including the state-protected right to keep material goods, reveals at least three facts. 1) Self is still king. 2) One ascribes to the paradigm of the world rather than to that of Jesus. 3) You are not loving your neighbor as yourself. By not returning to persons what they deserve, in fact by blessing them in spite of their ill treatment, citizens of the kingdom of heaven show they “are happy to suffer for the right cause”⁵⁶—the cause of emulating the Lord Himself, who “while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”⁵⁷

As we have done previously, we must ask, “What does verse 42 not mean?” Must the Christian always give to the one asking, never refusing the one desiring to borrow? Should I give a syringe full of cyanide to someone who is admittedly suicidal? No. Should I give drugs to a professed addict? No. Should I give food to a sloth who refuses to work? Paul said I must not.⁵⁸ Wisdom must be exercised in deciding what and when to give to the needy, lest the Christian actually provide a disservice to his neighbor. The best hermeneutical help for this verse and others in this context is God’s own behavior. Does He always give to him who asks? No. Paul prayed three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed.⁵⁹ God did not give to him what he desired and thought he needed. Does God always give even what Jesus said He gives

⁵⁴Deut 15:10-11, NLT; see Deuteronomy 15:7-11 for context. Cf. Psalm 112:9.

⁵⁵See Matthew 6:24.

⁵⁶Davies, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew*, 541.

⁵⁷1 Pet 2:23, NASB

⁵⁸See 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

⁵⁹See 2 Corinthians 12.

in Matthew 5:45—sun and rain? No. Thousands of persons, righteous and unrighteous, have perished throughout history due to drought. Like other verses in this pericope and elsewhere in the Sermon, the proverbial nature of Jesus' words is evident.

A pithy *reductio ad absurdum* argument against always giving and never refusing can be seen in Leon Morris' one-sentence refutation of unguarded "benevolence." "There would soon be a class of saintly paupers, owning nothing, and another of prosperous idlers and thieves."⁶⁰ A wooden application of verse 42 would, in the end, be self-defeating.

A few concluding observations are in order before moving to the sixth and final paragraph of Jesus' teaching on private personal relationships in this section of the Sermon. The Christian's ethic is not to be governed by the law which God has given to state judges, e.g., verse 38. *Lex talionis* is reserved for civil matters, not private, personal problems between you and your neighbor. In other words, all of Jesus' instruction pertains to personal ethics, not state code. Verses 39-42 "represent the demand for an unselfish temperament, for naked humility and a will to suffer the loss of one's personal rights . . . There is no room [in Christ's kingdom] for vengeance on a personal level (cf. Rom 12:19)."⁶¹ State legal processes are not in view in the Sermon. Jesus "is not overthrowing the principle of equivalent compensation on an institutional level."⁶² That 5:38-42 applies to one particular area of life accounts for the divine protocol we see elsewhere in Matthew's gospel: 6:14-15 and 10:32-33. Lastly, Jesus does not give any reasons in 5:38-42 as to why His disciples are to go the extra mile. Should we speculate? No, we should simply keep reading into the next pericope wherein the answer is clearly stated.

Jesus quotes from the same Old Testament verse to which He alluded and based His words in 5:39. But unlike the previous five instances of using the Torah as a springboard, here He tacks onto Leviticus 19:18 an ungodly, rabbi-born doctrine. Apparently, the Jews had long been teaching a truncated version of Moses' law. They had excised "as yourself." Considering

⁶⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 130.

⁶¹Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 93.

⁶²Ibid. There is no tension between Genesis 9:6—a key proof-text for the death penalty—and Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Interpreters may not extend the Bible's teaching on interpersonal relationships to national or international matters. Doing so would result in contradictory (or at least contrary)

themselves to be sons of Abraham,⁶³ a nation for whom God had a peculiar affection, they viewed one another as being in a different class than the rest of humanity, thereby preventing them from loving him or her whom God considered to be a neighbor. The Jews could love their neighbor but only as they narrowly defined πλησίον.

“Hate your enemy” is not present in the Old Testament. But it could have been inferred from passages such as Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Psalm 5:5, or Psalm 26:5. “The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity.”⁶⁴ The syllogisms upon which the Pharisees’ ethic was based is easily discernable: “God hates sinners; It is good to be like God; I should hate sinners. Pagans are sinners; I should hate sinners (as God does); I should hate pagans (non-Israelites).” Hating another human being however, even your enemy, has always been illicit in the eyes of God. Moreover, not loving another human by failing to meet his needs has always been sinful. Job, who “was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil,” said, “Have I ever rejoiced when disaster struck my enemies, or become excited when harm came their way? No, I have never sinned by cursing anyone or by asking for revenge. My servants have never said, ‘He let others go hungry.’ I have never turned away a *stranger* [emphasis mine] but have opened my doors to everyone.”⁶⁵

Just as there is a difference between the laws of interpersonal relationships and the laws of an entire society, the attitude and behavior of an individual Israelite towards an individual non-Israelite was to be very different than the nation of Israel’s disposition towards a hostile, pagan community. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and Psalm 139:21-22 are examples of Israel’s behavior towards a God-hating nation. Examples of an individual Israelite’s behavior towards an individual God-hater are given in Exodus 23:4-5, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 10:19, 1 Samuel 24:19, and Proverbs 25:21. A similar dynamic is taught in the New Testament in the way in which Christian soldiers or police of a state army may not “love” the evil-doer of another state, but he is simultaneously commanded to love the same evil-doer on a private, interpersonal level. Difficult to do? Are there gray areas? Most certainly.

doctrines in the Bible along with, perhaps, “Christian” states believing they can police the world and exact punishment for behavior over which God has not given them jurisdiction.

⁶³See Matthew 3:9.

⁶⁴Ps 5:5, NASB

⁶⁵Job 31:29-30, NLT

Has God always loved His enemies? Yes. And He is always both just and loving at the same time. In obedience to God, Israel slew the idolatrous people groups of Canaan. They did not, however, execute personal vengeance. “It is one thing to defend the honor and glory of God by seeking the defeat of His detracting enemies, but quite another to hate people personally as our own enemies. . . . We are to share God’s own balance of love and justice.”⁶⁶ God loved Adam and Eve, yet He punished them.⁶⁷ God loved Cain, yet He punished him.⁶⁸ God loved Sodom and Gomorrah, yet He decimated them.⁶⁹ God, unlike imperfect humans, is able to hate sinners (Psalm 5:5) while simultaneously loving and blessing them (Matt 5:45). This ability is supernatural, seemingly contradictory. But the two acts and attitudes are not. If a man wishes to be perfect as God is perfect, he should strive to do the same.

Who men have considered to be their πλησίον⁷⁰ and how they have treated him is radically contrasted to the words of the Lord in verse 44. Jesus saves the injunction to love one’s enemy for the last of the six examples of godliness, because they who obey it best exemplify the nature of God. To be godly, to be like God, to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, one must love *all* his neighbors, which encompasses one’s enemies. If a person loves his neighbor as himself, he is perfect like God. Jesus did not abrogate or nullify the Torah. No, He rightly taught it. Contained within verse 44 is the fulfillment of the whole Law. “For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”⁷¹

We learn in Luke 10 that even the Samaritan was to be considered a neighbor. Jews who loved other Jews as they loved themselves would have been behaving righteously in God’s sight. But they and anyone else who wished to enter the kingdom of heaven had to surpass this level of righteousness. “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁷² They needed to love those whom God loves; He loves “the evil and the good” (Matt 5:45).

⁶⁶MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 343.

⁶⁷See Genesis 3:16ff.

⁶⁸See Genesis 4:11ff.

⁶⁹See Genesis 18:24.

⁷⁰Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “πλησίον.” “The one who is near or close by; neighbor, *fellow human being* [emphasis mine].”

⁷¹Gal 5:14, NASB. See also Romans 13:9-10.

⁷²Matt 5:20, NASB

As we saw in verse 39, Matthew places emphasis on Jesus as the authoritative speaker by including the unnecessary first person personal pronoun with λέγω. Certain things had been said, believed, and practiced, but now His doctrine was to take first place in the hearts of God's people. Jesus' pronouncements trumped the perversions of the religious establishment.

Whom to love, how to love, and the definition of one's enemy is packed into verse 44. By telling the disciples to love their enemies, Jesus uses an *a fortiori* argument to command them to love everyone. If you must love those who are the hardest to love (i.e., enemy), you must love those who are easier to love (e.g., friend, brother). "Neighbor" of verse 43 and "brothers" of verse 47 may be considered one end of the persons-to-love spectrum, while "enemy" of verse 43 and "those who persecute you" is the other end. You can most readily love your enemy by praying for him. Who is he? He "who persecutes you." What Jesus does not say makes His new command⁷³ profoundly difficult. He does not say, "Avoid your enemies" or "Love your enemies if they . . ." No, Christians are to actively love those who persecute them. And prayer is only the first step; see verses 39-42!

Luke's parallel passage of Jesus' words better explains the meaning of ἀγαπάτε than any lexicon. "But I say to you who hear, love [ἀγαπάτε] your enemies, do good to those who hate you."⁷⁴ Talk such as prayer alone is cheap. A man loves his enemy by *doing* good to him, not just praying that he would be blessed. Do not look to the enemy to define what good he needs (see previous discussion). Do what is truly good—that which God says is good, e.g., feeding (Rom 12:20, Prov 25:21), evangelizing (Matt 28:18-20), and providing shelter (Job 31:32). Love is more than attitude; it is virtuous action toward the unlovely who do not deserve it and may even resent your benevolence.⁷⁵ God-pleasing love occurs when one, from the heart *and* hand, blesses his neighbor (friend or foe), expecting nothing except perhaps spite in return. The man who is perfect in God's sight is able to say, "Though my neighbor desires my life, I will seek his good."⁷⁶

⁷³The imperative is original to Jesus.

⁷⁴Luke 6:27, NASB

⁷⁵See 1 John 3:18 and 1 Corinthians 13.

⁷⁶Compare Job's unfailing love towards God even though he thought God may reduce his life to nothing. See especially Job 1:21 and 13:15ff.

To whom may we look for guidance in loving our enemy? God. Knowing He will *never* be worshiped and honored by them, God dispenses immeasurable love even to the non-elect. Jesus is the perfect model of verse 44b—“pray for those who persecute you.” He prayed for His murderers. While on the cross, He cried, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”⁷⁷ Amazing love, how can it be?

Jesus’ commands in verse 44 assume the persecution of His followers. Matthew reiterates this inevitable reality many times: 5:11-12; 10:23; 23:34; 24:9. Notwithstanding what sinners may be, the person with a kingdom-of-heaven perspective will not forget who sinners are—God’s image bearers. As such Christians should love all sinners. No sinner possesses any intrinsic goodness, yet we are able to love ourselves as if we were divine. Surely the believer who has been awakened to the truth about God and man can redirect some of his ever-present self-love to those who need God’s blessing.

Verse 45a finally provides us the motive for Jesus’ instruction in verses 39-42 and 44. Love and pray for your enemies “ὅπως γένησθε υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς.” The subordinate conjunction ὅπως, meaning “in order that,” indicates the aim of the preceding actions (loving and praying) in verse 44. “The more precise meaning of the verb **be** [γένησθε, emphasis original] in the context is ‘will show that you are.’”⁷⁸ Γένησθε here means something like “to approximate.” This form of γίνομαι occurs eight times in the New Testament.⁷⁹ Becoming a convert *could* be meant by the verb.⁸⁰ But the context here does not support this sense. Matthew’s usage is like that of Paul in Philippians 2:15, where the translators of the NASB render the verb as “you will prove yourselves to be.” Moreover, the subjunctive mood of γένησθε provides contingency to Jesus’ words; *exhibition* of one’s sonship is dependent on whether or not you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Matthew probably avoided the present indicative of γίνομαι to prevent readers from thinking that sonship is an acquired state resulting from continually doing something, loving and praying in this case.

⁷⁷Luke 23:34, NASB

⁷⁸Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 157.

⁷⁹Matt 5:45; 18:3; John 12:36; 15:8; Phil 2:15; Heb 6:12; 1 Pet 3:13; 2 Pet 1:4

⁸⁰See John 12:36.

The Babylonian Talmud *Qidduṣim* poignantly expresses what Jesus said to His disciples—“When you behave as sons, you are sons.”⁸¹ Furthermore, γένησθε cannot mean justification because the disciples are Jesus’ audience.⁸² And earlier in chapter five, Jesus had already stated that God was their father, not that He may someday become their father, provided they meet certain standards. Justification is never the subject of the Sermon on the Mount. The ethics of those who *are sons* is the subject. What is righteousness in God’s sight (5:20) is in view rather than how one becomes righteous.

A person’s fruit evidences his relationship to God. See 7:16-20 in the conclusion of the Sermon. “Christ’s meaning is, that they might appear, and be known to be the children of God, by doing those things in which they resemble their heavenly Father; and which are agreeable to this nature and conduct; as the tree is known by its fruit and the cause by its effect; for where adoption and regenerating grace take place, the fruit of good works is brought forth to the glory of God.”⁸³

The “already-aspect” of Matthew’s eschatology⁸⁴ may be seen when verse 45 is compared to Luke’s parallel passage. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward *will be* [ἐσται, emphasis mine] great, and you *will be* [ἔσεσθε, emphasis mine] sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.”⁸⁵ Luke uses the future tense while Matthew uses the aorist tense.

Jesus gives simple ways whereby God the Father loves sinners. His enemies need sunshine and rain to survive. So He sends both to them. “The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food in due time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.”⁸⁶ Likewise, God’s sons can love by giving to all that which they need. Loving proves to be rather simple and doable by all.

⁸¹John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text. The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 268.

⁸²See Matthew 5:1-2.

⁸³John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1852), 43.

⁸⁴Matt 12:28 (NASB)—“But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God *has come* [emphasis mine] upon you.”

⁸⁵Luke 6:35, NASB

⁸⁶Ps 145:15-16, NASB

Why will loving others show that you are a son of God? Because God is love (1 John 4:7-12).⁸⁷ Disciples of Christ imitate God's love when they love others, regardless. Men will be like and be guided by that which they love and serve for "no one can serve two masters."⁸⁸ Humans will always imitate what they love; it is unavoidable. If your love resembles that of the Father who is in heaven, you are probably a Christian. If not, you are definitely lost.⁸⁹

"If you love (only) those who love you, what reward have you earned? Do not even the tax-collectors [τελῶναι] do the same? And if you warmly greet only your brothers, what more (than others) are you doing? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" Verses 46 and 47 contain a parallel, three-element structure.

<u>Verse 46</u>	<u>Verse 47</u>
"you love"	"you warmly greet"
"what reward have you earned"	"what more are you doing"
"tax-collectors"	"Gentiles"

As such, Matthew's use of the adverb μόνον in verse 47 lends support for supplying it in verse 46. Love given *only* to those like oneself is purely natural. What consistent, sane man does not love those like himself? It is easy to bless those who resemble you since everyone values himself. Supernatural love is poured out to all persons, even the unlovely who despise you. The "righteousness" of the Pharisees produced love for other Pharisees. Big deal. For the disciple of Christ to exceed their righteousness (5:20), he must love everyone. If the infamous tax collectors⁹⁰ could love one another, the disciples had to exceed their "love" in breadth and depth in order to imitate God (5:45a) and inherit His kingdom. The disciple of Christ, a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, must do more if he is to resemble the Lord of the kingdom of heaven—Yahweh. Again, he must obey Jesus' words in 5:38-44 as well as the rest of the Sermon.

⁸⁷See also Ephesians 5:1-2.

⁸⁸Matt 6:24a, NASB

⁸⁹See Matthew 22:37-40.

⁹⁰Τελῶναι here probably stands for "the despised . . . [מְדֻכְּסִים], Jewish tax farmers and their agents who, having purchased the toll collecting concessions, collected indirect taxes for the Romans." Davies, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew*, 558.

Lexical similarities between 47b and 5:20 would have reminded the disciples of their need to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. 5:20—ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον. 5:47b—τί περισσὸν ποιεῖτε;

God is not impressed with interparty (τελῶναι—worldly Jews) or interracial (ἐθνικοὶ—sinister pagans) “love.” Application for the twenty-first century Christian: God is dishonored by churches who fail to love their community. If, as communities of God’s people, we wish to be perfect, we must show some measure of the love which God has given to us.

Verse 48 is the culmination of Jesus’ command in v. 44 (love your enemy) as well as those which summarize the previous five paragraphs: verse 22 (do not be angry with others), verses 28ff (do not lust), verse 32 (stay married), verses 34ff (keep your word), and verse 39 (set aside your personal rights for the sake of others). The disciple of Christ may show himself to be τέλειος by observing Christ’s words, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.⁹¹

Matthew uses the coordinating conjunction οὖν as an inferential conjunction,⁹² relating the content of verse 48 to the preceding instruction of Jesus in verses 21-47. The conclusion of the six paragraphs of 21-47 is verse 48. It should come as no surprise that another Pentateuchal text underlies “You be perfect [τέλειοι] as your heavenly Father is perfect [τέλειός].” Deuteronomy 18:13 (LXX)—“τέλειος ἔσῃ ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου.” Deuteronomy 18:13 (NASB)—“You shall be blameless [τέλειος] before the LORD your God.” The words of both Moses and Jesus (the new Moses as He is sometimes called by scholars) contain the same predicate adjective, τέλειος, to describe the people of God. The parallel passage in Luke 6:36 reads, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” It seems that Matthew’s emphasis is not simply that of the disciples being morally perfect but being in all possible ways like their heavenly Father, who happens to be morally perfect. Matthew and the other Gospel authors could have used any attribute of God—be it perfection (Matt 5:48), mercy (Luke 6:36), or holiness (Lev 19:2)—as a mark towards which the son of the Father in heaven should strive. Luke’s substitution of mercy for holiness or perfection is significant. In so doing, “Jesus subordinated or redefined ‘holiness’ and thereby gave expression to one of his

⁹¹See Matthew 5:17.

⁹²Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 673.

most characteristic convictions.”⁹³ Jesus taught that love and mercy is the crown jewel of divine τέλειος. Moral rectitude requires mercy. Having said this, δικαιοσύνη of verse 20 does interpret τέλειος to also mean complete moral wholeness. Multiple meanings are common for Matthew.

Each of the paragraphs of 5:21-48 speak to one’s relationship with others. Perfection, maturity, or wholeness (all valid meanings of τέλειος)⁹⁴ as it is defined by the Father has been achieved when one of His children loves others as God loves them. It is noteworthy that the only other occurrence of the adjectival form of τέλειος in Matthew is in the context of loving one’s neighbor.⁹⁵ “God is the measure of man.”⁹⁶ He may only be said to be perfect as God is perfect when he mimics God. In particular, he must love everyone.

The presence of the unnecessary personal pronoun ὑμεῖς and the placement of the imperatival main verb ἔσεσθε at the beginning of verse 48 places heavy emphasis on the disciples’ charge to be τέλειοι ὡς ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν. Recall the Israelites of old were also called to emulate God. “You must be holy because I, Yahweh, am holy. I have set you apart from all other people to be my very own.”⁹⁷ You see even in this first discourse section of Matthew a faint foreshadow of Jesus taking the kingdom of God and giving it to a people producing its fruit.⁹⁸ In R. T. France’s language, Jesus was resurrecting the people of God.

While Matthew chapter five does describe the kingdom-of-heaven ethic by which Christians should measure their practical holiness, Jesus’ words also push all readers to utter dependence on Himself as God with us⁹⁹—the savior of sinners.¹⁰⁰ For who is perfect? No mere man has ever loved another as himself, hence man’s need for the Savior who has.

⁹³Davies, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew*, 561.

⁹⁴I am aware that a word seldom represents every meaning of its semantic domain.

⁹⁵See Matthew 19:21. Love your neighbor (by giving to the poor in this case) if you want to have any hope of inheriting eternal life with God.

⁹⁶Davies, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew*, 563.

⁹⁷Lev 20:26

⁹⁸See Matthew 21:43.

⁹⁹Matt 1:23

Reflection and Conclusion

Matthew 5:38-48, along with the previous four paragraphs beginning with verse 21, is “not a foolproof scheme of rules but general directions, not laws for society but an ethic for those within the Christian community. . . . The text functions more like a story than a legal code.”¹⁰¹ A wooden application of the passage would lead to spiritually unhelpful absurdities. “Its primary character is to instill principles and qualities through a vivid inspiration of the moral imagination. What one should come away with is not a grossly incomplete set of irrevocable statutes or bloodless abstractions but an unjaded impression of what is right and wrong, a challenging moral ideal. That ideal may, in truth, forever exceed human grasp.”¹⁰² This should not surprise us. Should not we expect from Christ general principles for godly behavior, given the infinite number of ethical situations that one may experience in this life? Consider the number of law books written by barristers for the people of the kingdoms of this world. Practically innumerable. If the holy One had decided to provide to the citizens of His kingdom a command for every conceivable situation, “the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.”¹⁰³

The Law and the Prophets is central to unlocking Matthew’s intended meaning of the Sermon on the Mount (including 5:38-48). I have said much about the Law. But what about the Prophets? One prophecy in particular provides us much exegetical light. Hosea 6:6—“I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings.”¹⁰⁴ Saving knowledge of God is demonstrated by the exercise of love and mercy. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus taught the “whole Law and the Prophets” depends on love towards God and neighbor, mutually inclusive acts. Through Hosea, God essentially said, “I want you to show love; I want you to know Me.” In other words, love as I, Yahweh, define love and you will know Me. Knowing God and loving are interdependent acts. Someone who professes to know God will of necessity love. What or whom? Near the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives the answer. “In everything, therefore, treat *people*

¹⁰⁰Matt 1:21

¹⁰¹Davies, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew*, 566.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³John 21:25

¹⁰⁴NLT

[emphasis mine] the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”¹⁰⁵ He likens the Law and the Prophets (which we just saw are dependent on the “two commandments”) to the “Golden Rule”—a nice paraphrase of Matthew 22:39—“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” To treat people as you would have them treat you is to love them “for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.”¹⁰⁶ With this in mind, the meaning of Jesus’ words in 5:17 and the rest the chapter may be ascertained.

The members of the religious establishment that eventually had Jesus killed knew much about God. They knew well the letter of the Law and the Prophets. And they regularly offered sacrifices to God. Notwithstanding their “knowledge” and cultic obedience, however, they did not know God as those of His kingdom must. Only a perfect man, God knew, would ever be able to fulfill the desire which He expressed through Hosea (6:6a). *Any* sinner can know about God and offer to Him sacrifices, but *no* sinner can perfectly love Him, which requires that the sinner show mercy to his neighbor. Jesus, unlike all other men, perfectly loved, even to the point of death, His sinful neighbors. He fulfilled the essence of the Law and the Prophets. In the sacrifice of Himself (think Hosea 6:6b and how Jesus said you may “sacrifice” yourself in 5:38-48), Jesus simultaneously fulfilled His heavenly Father’s desire and His neighbor’s need by exercising mercy.

Some basic, universal principles may be gleaned from Matthew 5:21-48. The spirit of the law is more important than the letter. The essence supersedes the form. The law indicates the type of character God requires of His people. The purpose of the law is to prevent inner *and* outward sin while promoting inner *and* outward righteousness. The law is not an end in itself. Obedience to it will result in greater moral purity, yes. But the purpose is not to highlight a man’s moral integrity but to glorify the Lawgiver. Notice 5:48 does not simply say “Be perfect.” No, it says, “You be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Why? So that men “may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”¹⁰⁷ Every person who wishes to be a son of the Father must be perfect! “With people this is impossible, but with

¹⁰⁵Matt 7:12, NASB. Called the “royal law” in James 2:8.

¹⁰⁶Eph 5:29a

¹⁰⁷Matt 5:16

God all things are possible.”¹⁰⁸ Thankfully, “The Demander of righteousness is also the Giver of Righteousness.”¹⁰⁹ The Lawgiver is also the Law-fulfiller (5:17).

You have waited long enough. Do you know the answer yet? Should you reach for the shotgun or not? According to Daniel R. Heimbach, professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, “You had better kill the intruder and quickly. The strong have an obligation to protect the weak against unjust aggression even to the point of using deadly force, and that obligation applies regardless of civil appointment. From the parable of the Good Samaritan, there are two relevant factors: proximity and ability. If you are in a position to intervene and have the ability to intervene successfully, then you are OBLIGATED [emphasis is original] to intervene on behalf of someone whose life is unjustly threatened. But in the scenario described there is another factor that heightens your obligation to kill this intruder. In this scenario, you are a husband and the woman whose life is at stake is your wife. Husbands are more than passing neighbors (like the Good Samaritan). That is because husbands have an assigned responsibility (from God, from society, and from promises made to your wife) to protect their wives. A husband’s role in marriage entails an assigned office that is both moral-spiritual (it is an office for which you are responsible to God) and civil-social (it is an office for which you are responsible to society), and this office is every bit as official as the office of protection assigned to police officers. . . . God considers protecting her life to be such a duty you will be judged guilty of sin if you fail to do all you can to protect her.”¹¹⁰ I agree.

¹⁰⁸Matt 19:26

¹⁰⁹MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 287.

¹¹⁰Personal correspondence. September 12, 2005.