

Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 5:38-48

Context

- ***Old Testament Background and Legalistic Use***

- In each section Jesus is taking people back to the Old Testament Law and engaging with the interpretation that was given.
- “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’ comes from Exodus 21, Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19. It was designed restrict and limit punishment so that violence didn’t escalate. If someone cut off my brother’s hand I was not to respond by cutting off his head! The other important thing to bear in mind was that it was given to govern the law courts, it was not meant to encourage personal revenge. Yet by Jesus’ day this principle was being used to allow personal revenge. Jesus shows that this is not how the law is meant to be taken.
- ‘Love your neighbour’ was a clear command in God’s law (Leviticus 19:18). By Jesus’ day this has been legalistically twisted so that ‘neighbour’ was very specific. It was therefore seen as right to hate your enemies. Again Jesus will show the true depth of the command means loving everyone even our enemies. See the parable of the Good Samaritan for the same principle.

- ***Jesus is fulfilling the commands***

- In 5:17 Jesus told us that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. That is exactly what Jesus is doing in this section from 5:21-48. He fulfils these commands by keeping them perfectly as seen in not taking revenge on his persecutors but instead praying for them (see Matthew 25:57-68, Luke 23:34, and 1 Peter 2:21-25.) Jesus also fulfils the law by ‘filling full the commands’ and showing us how deep they go. He shows us that we must not legalistically reduce them to superficial commands but seek to keep them fully.

- ***‘Be perfect’***

- 5:48 is the conclusion and summary not just of 5:38-48 but of the whole section that began back in 5:17. In 5:20 Jesus has told us that the righteousness of his disciples is to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees. He has been showing us what this deep surpassing righteousness should look like in 5:21-47. Now in 5:48 he brings the section to conclusion by urging us to live up to our Heavenly Father’s standards of righteousness.

Structure

- Our passage naturally breaks into two sections (v38-42 and v43-47). v48 acts as the conclusion for the whole unit. Each section follows the same basic structure;
 - 1st Jesus lays out the received teaching by using the phrase ‘You have heard that it was said...’ - v38 and v43.
 - 2nd Jesus then gives his fulfilment of the command by using the phrase ‘But I tell you...’ v39 and v44.
 - 3rd Jesus then gives examples to show the depth of the command. ‘If...’ - v39-42 and v46-47.

Tricky Bits

- ***How far are we to take the command ‘Do not resist an evil person’?***
 - Some have taken this command to argue for Christian pacifism saying that Christians should never fight in wars. Others have used a similar line of thinking to say that Christians should not be part of the police. I do not think it would be wise to let the discussion go down these lines because I do not think that Jesus is addressing these sorts of questions. The context of v38-42 show that this is about individuals not taking revenge. Christians are not to retaliate. We’re not to take the law into our own hands. God has ordained the state to punish wrongdoing (Romans 13:1-7). Matthew 5:39 is not about the state but about the individual Christian.
- ***Does giving to the one who asks you mean that we should never use discretion when giving? Must we give to every cause?***
 - Should Christians give to every charity that cold calls them or stops them in the street. Should we give to every homeless person regardless of what they will spend the money on? Should we give to everyone who asks even if the money we give will be spent on the drugs that will ruin their life? Again there will be different opinions on this and we must be careful not to miss what Jesus is teaching. In these verses Jesus is countering a legalistic approach to life. When it comes to our giving he is challenging us not to have a ‘tight-fisted, penny-pinching attitude” (Carson.) Instead of demanding our rights, Jesus’ people are to be those who lay down their rights just as Christ laid down his rights and gave generously for us. In applying this passage we must avoid the legalistic mindset that wants to constantly draw boundary lines. Jesus is wanting to transform the attitude of our hearts not just reshape our boundary lines.
- ***What was the background to ‘going the extra mile’?***
 - In those days a Roman soldier could legally commandeer a civilian to help him, e.g. to carry his luggage. Jesus’ people are to be those who go willingly and are even to go further than we are asked or compelled too. We are to accept the inconvenience joyfully rather than grudgingly. Again we must avoid a legalistic approach to going the extra mile. It would completely miss the point to say, “I’ll go 2 miles but not an inch further.” Jesus wants to change us from being people who say, ‘How far must I go...’ to ‘How far can I go...’ Again this reflects the love and example of the Christ!
- ***How can we be perfect?***
 - There is a real danger that this final verse could sink us. If we approach the Sermon on the Mount as what we need to do to be a Christian then we will despair because Jesus’ standards are impossibly high. In many ways that’s the point! If we think that we can be good enough to earn a place in his kingdom then Jesus is showing us throughout this sermon that we will never be good enough because God’s standard is perfection. He wants us to realise that we cannot measure up to his standard and come to him, mourning our spiritual poverty and seeking the righteousness that only he can give us (5:3-6.) This teaching then is not how to become God’s children but how to live as his children. Notice that God is described as our Heavenly Father. That is not conditional on whether we achieve perfection. It rests entirely on the perfection of Jesus given to us by faith at the cross. Jesus is showing us that as God’s children we are now to strive for perfection and righteousness in thanks to him. The fact that we are to aim for perfection means that we will always have room for improvement. No matter what progress we have made there will always be room for improvement.

We're to compare ourselves to our Heavenly Father, not to our brothers and sisters around us. That will keep us humble and keep us aiming for improvement.

Big Idea

Don't retaliate but instead respond with undeserved love and kindness just as Jesus and your Heavenly Father showed you

Applications

- **Dwell on the selfless love of Christ and the Father for you**
 - These commands are not random. They flow from who God is and what he has done for us so spend time giving thanks for the way that Jesus laid down his rights and did not retaliate for our sake. Rejoice that Jesus practiced what he preached and he did it for our sake! It is in response to him that we are to seek to obey Jesus' commands.
 - Similarly we are to dwell on the common grace of God who lovingly provides for everyone even his enemies. As his children we are to imitate his love and kindness.
- **Don't hold tightly to your rights**
 - 'Know your rights' 'stand up for your rights' 'make sure you get what you deserve' 'don't let them walk all over you' 'don't be a push over' 'don't be a door mat' 'don't be taken for a ride.' Do these sound familiar? Aren't these how we are normally taught to behave. We prize (even idolise) our rights and our status and yet at the heart of the gospel is the Lord Jesus laying down his rights for our sake even though we had wronged him as his enemies. "...the way of the cross, not notions of "right and wrong," is the Christian's principle of conduct." (Carson.) He laid aside his rights at great cost to himself and he calls us to imitate him rather than the culture around us.
- **Don't take revenge even if people deserve it**
 - How tempting it is to retaliate when we have been wronged. How tempting to give them what they deserve. How tempting it is to bear a grudge and look for a way to pay them back. Yet as those who have been lavishly forgiven Jesus calls us not to retaliate but instead to respond with love. Augustine said that "Many have learned to turn the other cheek, but do not know how to live him by whom they were struck."
- **Love, serve and pray for those who are against you**
 - It's not enough for us to passively not retaliate. Jesus is calling us to actively love those who don't love us.
 - John Stott is worth quoting at length;

Our enemy is seeking our harm; we must seek his good. For this is how God has treated us. It is 'while we were enemies' that Christ died for us to reconcile us to God. If he gave himself for his enemies, we must give ourselves for ours.

Words can also express our love, however, both words addressed to our enemies themselves and words addressed to God on their behalf. 'Bless those who curse you.' If they call down disaster and catastrophe upon our heads, expressing in words their wish for our downfall, we must retaliate by calling down heaven's blessing upon them, declaring in words that we wish them nothing but good. Finally, we direct our words to God. Both evangelists record this command of Jesus: 'Pray for those who persecute (or abuse) you.'

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer captures why praying for our enemies is such a powerful thing when he says;

'Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.' Moreover, if intercessory prayer is an expression of what love we have, it is a means to increase our love as well. It is impossible to pray for someone without loving him, and impossible to go on praying for him without discovering that our love for him grows and matures. We must not, therefore, wait before praying for an enemy until we feel some love for him in our heart. We must begin to pray for him before we are conscious of loving him, and we shall find our love break first into bud, then into blossom.'

- **Keep aiming for perfection**

- No matter our progress in loving our enemies there is always room for improvement. Jesus doesn't want us to look around at other people and think, 'Well I'm doing better than them so I don't need to bother...' Instead he wants us to look to our Heavenly Father and aim to be perfect as he is perfect. He's the standard and so there's always reason to be humble and there's always room for improvement.

Questions

Starter - How are we normally tempted to respond when someone wrongs us?

You could create one or more scenarios to help people think about this. Think of a scenario where they are insulted, or their rights are infringed or they are harmed in some way...

For example, 'You are driving along when someone cuts you up and nearly causes a crash. How do you feel? How are you tempted to respond?'

Or 'You are watching TV when someone ridicules Christians believing in God?' How do you feel about that person? How do you respond?'

v38-42

1. What is the principle behind 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth?'

The principle behind the command was one of proportional response. The law made room for retribution but it was to be measured and appropriate. It was to be decided upon and administered by the law courts not the individual.

2. How does Jesus deepen and fill out this command?

Jesus shows us that when it comes to personal wrongs we are not to retaliate. We are to lay aside our rights and be prepared to be wronged. You could go through each of the examples in v39-42 and tease out the particular emphasis in each one.

3. Why do we find this teaching so hard?

You may have spoken about this in the starter. It's important to recognise that this goes against our natural human inclination and the way that society encourages us to behave. We're told to stand up for ourselves, don't let them push you around etc. We need God's help if we are to live like this.

4. How did Jesus live out this teaching?

This is vital. Jesus doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk. You could go to Jesus' trial, his beatings, his crucifixion or a passage like 1 Peter 2 to help the group see not only that Jesus gives us an example but that he did this for us! We are the beneficiaries of his turning the other cheek and going the extra mile.

5. How will his example help us next time we are wronged?

Go back to an every day situation like being cut up on the road or when Christians are insulted in the media. Let's pray for one another to respond with the same grace and mercy that Christ has shown to us.

v43-48

6. How does God bless and love his enemies?

Here we're really just wanting people to focus on v45. Our love is to flow from his love. Help people to think about how God loved and blessed us even though we were his enemies.

7. What will it look like for you to love people who are against you?

- How will you pray for them?

Again it might be helpful to give people scenarios and examples to think through. For example how will we love and pray for an atheist colleague who quietly scoffs at our faith? Or how will we respond to those who disagree with us on sexuality, marriage, gender or abortion?

How should we pray for them and bless them? What will it look like for us to 'do more than others'? (v47.)