

# TO ERR IS HUMAN, TO FORGIVE DIVINE

*SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY*

**Danny Hall**

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People increasingly approach life with the feeling that “it’s us versus them.” More and more, people find themselves in separate camps in a number of arenas in life. One is politics. We are in an election year, and the political conversations are going to get more heated, intense, and vitriolic. Another arena is social issues. More and more, people find themselves in different camps because of their values, their perspectives on how life should be lived and how our country should go forward. In economics people living in different strata increasingly feel that “it’s us versus them.” Those who are high up believe the rest are trying to take away what they have earned through their hard labor, and those at the bottom believe the rest are exploiting them. And finally, we see this in religion. Our country is becoming ever more religiously diverse and pluralistic, and we Christians are becoming ever more uncomfortable. Some of us pine for the good old days when at least it felt like Christianity was the dominant force in our society, and the entry point of conversation about religion was some sort of Christian perspective. That is diminishing, so we feel as if we have to defend our turf in discussions of religion.

All of these things illustrate the fact that it is very easy to fall into an “us versus them” mentality. And our society’s emphasis on individual rights promotes thinking in terms of self-protection. How do I protect my rights, my wealth, my position, even my faith, from those who may be trying to take them away from me?

In Jesus’ day Israel was living under military occupation by the Romans. The Jews had had a long history of being the people of God, but now they found themselves oppressed by the Romans, so their culture had become very much about preserving the status quo and protecting themselves against outside threats. No longer were they seeing themselves as a light to the nations. They were looking more at how to survive. They had become very closed and self-protective. They had developed tools of self-identity and self-preservation, most of which involved keeping minutiae of the Law that had grown up over centuries of tradition.

When Jesus walked into that milieu he told the Jews they needed to think differently about who they were as the people of God. In the Sermon on the Mount he has much to teach us about changing our thinking from an “us versus them” approach that is about self-protection to a sense of being called to actually get involved in the world, trusting God for our care and security.

Jesus taught that to be a true follower of God is not to be committed to Torah, as was thought in that day, but is rather to be committed to him as the Messiah, the Lord of the Law and the Lord of all things. The whole Old Testament was pointing toward him as its fulfillment, the culmination of God’s great revelation. He is the focus of our worship. He is therefore the one who can help us understand how to follow him in our daily life. He has encouraged us to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, to reflect the very heart of God and the real intent of God’s Law. He has been giving us a series of examples in everyday life when his Lordship runs up against natural human tendencies and even the tendencies of religion itself.

In this message we will finish Matthew 5 and look at the last two examples of practical living. Matthew 5:38-48:

**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 resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek,**

**turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants 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, so 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

In these last two illustrations Jesus calls us first to selfless living and then to an ethic of forgiveness and love. Let’s look at the first of these admonitions.

## **Trusting God for protection**

He again starts with a reference to the tradition that was rooted in the Old-Testament Law: “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” This command was intended to guide civil justice in the nation of Israel and to curb vigilantism and personal revenge, which would naturally go to excess. It is the natural inclination of people when harmed to want to exact vengeance on the perpetrator. If that were left totally unchecked in society, the result would be vigilantism everywhere, chaos, and anarchy. So God, in a concession to the sinfulness of man’s heart, set up the civil order of the nation of Israel with a series of guidelines for carrying out justice in that society. It included punishment that was equal to the offense committed. The phrase “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” is part of a list of principles to ensure that civil justice meted out fairness to both victim and perpetrator. (Exodus 21:23-36; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:21.) Over time, though, this command had evolved into the personal freedom to exact one’s own revenge. It promoted retaliation as a means of restoring justice.

Jesus’ command is to stop doing this. He says, “Do not resist an evil person.” Now, some have taken this to mean that we can never protect ourselves if we are being physically attacked, that there is no recourse whenever we are treated unjustly, that we are never to even stand against wrong if we see it in society. I don’t think this was Jesus’ intent. The word “resist” here means to oppose or stand up to. It is the same word we find Paul using to describe himself in Galatians 2:11 when he says he opposed, or resisted, Peter. Peter had come to the church at Galatia, and he had begun to act like a hypocrite and was destroying the fellowship there. Paul says, “I opposed him to his face.” So when there are things that violate God’s commands, particularly in the family of faith, there is a place for admonition. What Jesus says to stop doing is exacting personal revenge when attacked or impinged upon.

He goes on to give four clear examples of how this might work out. He says we need to be willing to sacrifice and refrain from taking revenge, first of all, when we experience assaults on our self-esteem and dignity. “Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” Since most people are right-handed, slapping someone on the right cheek was probably a backhanded slap, which was the ultimate insult or demeaning of somebody’s character. Jesus says, “As my followers who are living for my glory, at some point you are going to be insulted by someone. How are you going to respond?” He tells us that we don’t have to fight back to preserve our reputation or our sense of dignity, because our dignity and self-esteem are not derived from what other people think of us, so they are not going to be torn down by the insults and attacks of other people. What we have to do is remember that our self-

esteem and dignity are derived from the value we have to our heavenly Father as his children. We have the ultimate sense of self-esteem and dignity! We are valued by the God of the universe, created in his image, redeemed by his death, and called into fellowship with him.

The second example of not taking revenge is when our comfort and security are threatened. "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also." In that culture the coat was considered one's most precious personal possession. It not only served as a covering against the weather, but, for most people, it also served as their blanket when they slept. So the coat symbolized security for most people. Jesus is saying not to worry about giving up even the things that make you feel secure. Why would he say that? Because your security ultimately comes from God.

How much energy we spend trying to create comfort zones and security! All of us who are parents know what it's like to worry about the security of our children. What are they getting into? What are the influences in their lives? Those are important questions for parents, but let's be honest--we can't completely control those things. With each passing year they seem less in our control. Yes, we can set parameters and speak godly wisdom into our children's lives. We can provide discipline and direction. But ultimately, whatever cocoon of security we create around our family to protect them will not be impenetrable. We expend so much energy worrying about that! Jesus is simply saying that we can never secure ourselves. The things that best provide a sense of security can be taken away from us. When that happens, we need to let them go, because God is our security. He is the only one who can really protect us.

The third example of not seeking revenge is when there are impositions on our personal freedom. He says, "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two." This is a reference to the law of the land of that day, which allowed the Roman occupying forces to compel the Jews as citizens of one of their territories to carry their pack of gear for them up to a distance of one Roman mile (a little less than our measure of a mile). It was a pretty good walk, and it was an imposition on the Jews' personal freedom. It was a reminder that they were an oppressed people living under the power of a foreign dictator. They had no right to resist. But what is Jesus' command? Don't just walk one mile, walk two! Demonstrate your absolute trust that true freedom is not something created by society. True freedom is found in Christ. No one can take that away. It is total freedom.

Now, I believe Jesus was directing this command particularly toward the rising zealot movement in the nation, of which one of his own disciples was a member. It was the zealots' plan to resist the Roman occupation, to find ways of committing civil disobedience like refusing to carry the pack, and ultimately to foment insurrection to overthrow the Romans. Jesus was not concerned with reordering the socio-political landscape. He was concerned with finding people who would live righteously and uphold what really mattered: eternal values of forgiveness, love, grace, and true freedom.

Jesus' fourth example of not seeking revenge is when we are asked to give up our personal property. He says, "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you." Here he is telling us that we cannot be so committed to our personal possessions that we can no longer be generous. One of people's most basic instincts, whether they have much property or little, is to protect it.

I remember when Ginger and I first moved from college to seminary. We had been married a little over a year, and everything we owned fit in a U-Haul trailer. But in our seminary days, when we had hardly any money and few possessions, we had more fun sharing the little bit that we had! Those are some of our best memories. Yet how easy it is for us to become protective of our things over time. We've all heard stories about people borrowing things and not returning them. When I was thinking about this, I deliberately didn't look through my own bookshelves for fear I would find a book that I'd borrowed

from somebody and hadn't returned, and I'm sure that some of mine out there, too! We have so much anxiety over our things, but Jesus is saying, "Be generous. Does someone need something and want to borrow it? Loan it to him." He is speaking in absolute terms to remind us that this is yet another area where we don't have to protect ourselves. We can be generous, giving people, because that is the nature of God's kingdom.

Now, none of this means we should be unreasonable or foolish. But it does call us to trust that God is the Lord of our lives, and not all these earthly things that we get so easily frightened about.

In the second section of this passage Jesus calls us to loving forgiveness.

## **Loving our enemies**

Again he refers to an Old-Testament command and quotes the tradition of his time. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" The Old-Testament command actually read, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself..." (Leviticus 19:18.) There were two things wrong with the way it had come to be quoted. First, the phrase "as yourself" had been taken away, and the phrase "and hate your enemy" had been added in its place. We really do generally care about ourselves, and in the same way that we want to be cared for, we are to extend that love to all. Second, the idea of "your neighbor" had been very much narrowed down from its original meaning. Jesus teaches against this on a number of occasions. The idea had evolved to mean those whom you like or who like you, those closest to you, those who are socially acceptable and with whom you are comfortable. Those are the people you are to love. But removing "as yourself" took away the sacrificial dimension of even that love. Then adding on "and hate your enemy" meant you were free to hate all the people who were outside your comfort zone, free to not do good to them.

Jesus says, "Let me give you an elevated command, not an altered one: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He calls his followers to a whole different way of thinking. What it means to be a loving person is to include everyone, the unlovely and even enemies. The culmination of Jesus' teaching on this subject is perhaps the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in which he enlarges the concept of who a neighbor is to include anyone who is in need, even the unclean and the destitute. The truly neighborly person is the one who is lovingly and sacrificially willing to meet need wherever it is found, to extend himself or herself out of the comfort zone. Jesus takes this all the way to loving one's enemies. Romans 12:19-20, which quotes the Old Testament, says, "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. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." We are to extend God's love and forgiveness even to those who oppose us.

He goes on to say what it means to follow him in this way: "so that you may be sons of your Father, who is in heaven." We show ourselves to be true sons and daughters of God in this world, true followers of the Lord, when we exemplify this extraordinary love and grace and forgiveness, for God himself is a merciful and just God. "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." God is merciful even to the unrighteous. He allows even the righteous to suffer sometimes. God is just in his dealings with all people.

Jesus goes on to say that anyone can love the lovable people. The most morally reprobate people in our society can figure out how to return love to those who love them. There is nothing extraordinary about that. Loving your own family or the people closest to you is something pretty much anybody can do. But the call of the followers of Jesus is to show God's love, who loved us even while we were his enemies!

The ultimate expression of love is that when we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God extended forgiveness to us who were hostile to him (Romans 5:8-10). So to be true examples of God's love and righteousness in this world, we must be men and women of grace and forgiveness.

## Displaying who Jesus is

The final verse of this chapter summarizes all that Jesus has been teaching us in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word "perfect" means complete, finished, or mature. He is basically saying, "Be all that you were redeemed to be. Just as God lives out his actions in a way that is consistent with his character, you should live in a way that is consistent with what you were redeemed to be." Created in the image of God, now being transformed completely into the image of Christ, we have a chance to display the wonder of who Jesus is. So our goal is to allow Jesus to shine more and more through our lives, to be ever more conformed to his image, so that people are pointed through our lives to the Savior, the one who has rescued us and longs to rescue them.

Let me summarize some basic implications of this sermon. First, kingdom people are those who live for the glory of God, not for their own glory or even for the glory of their religion. Second, kingdom people are those who live to demonstrate God's love to others. This whole sermon fleshes out Jesus' summation of the Law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:36-39; Mark 12:28-31.) If you distill all the Biblical teaching about how to live, it comes down to these two statements: love God and love people. Jesus has been examining the ways the ways we can live this out in our everyday lives. He intended the Sermon on the Mount to declare the impotence of the Law and reveal the heart of God, to absolutely stun his listeners with the overwhelming nature of what it means to be his followers, and to cast his listeners on the mercy of God. The only reasonable response is to submit ourselves to Jesus' Lordship and rely on his grace to work in us and through us to do what we cannot do ourselves. Trusting the resources he has placed within us, as his children we have the capacity then to live to his glory, to love others as he loves them, and to display more and more the image of Christ in our lives. This is our calling as the people of God.

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Catalog No. 4908  
Matthew 5:38-48  
Eighth Message  
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February 22, 2004

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