



**THE  
BRIDGE  
CHURCH**

**Love in Action  
February 27th, 2022**

Okay, so here's my introduction for today: we're talking about retaliation and enemy love. How's that for an intro? Right? I don't have a funny story or any kind of example or object lesson. Retaliation and enemy love.

And I'll be honest, again—I said this last week, too—there's a heaviness in my heart, in my soul, in preparing to share these words of Jesus, because I know that there's just a myriad of experiences and it will hit us in different ways. My prayer is that by God's Grace, we'll receive it. Now, some of you know that last week I also kind of called an audible in the middle of the sermon, which I don't do often, but there's a whole chunk of text that I didn't actually get to last week that I do feel like we need to talk about briefly today before we get to talking about retaliation and enemy love.

So to sort of ease us into that difficult topic, we're going to begin talking about divorce. Doesn't that sound great? Okay. Matthew 5. If you're unaware, we're in a series on the Sermon on the Mount. It's the greatest collection of teachings from Jesus about what it means to live in the Kingdom, to be people that not only simply pray a prayer, but apprentice Jesus to live in a completely new kind of reality. And this is where we left off.

Matthew chapter 5, verse 31. "It has been said anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Nothing controversial there, right? A couple of things, if you remember... Last week we talked about anger, contempt, and then lust. And now keep in mind, this is a sermon. So these ideas are actually connected. They're linked in some specific ways. This progression should come as no surprise to us. Even in American history, I think of the sexual liberation of the 60s, followed by the rise of easy divorce culture in the 70s, the breakdown of the

family in the 80s, the rise of hook-up culture in the 90s, and the redefinition of sexuality in the 2000s. And now sociologists are talking about the end of sex in Western civilization.

In fact, did you know that young Americans are having less sex in over 25 years? Less sex in over 25 years now? I think there are many reasons for this. I think the chief of those is pornography. I think it's the main reason.

But there's a sequence here, I believe, to anger, contempt, lust, and now divorce. Before I get into this at all, I also know that this is really personal for a lot of us. This isn't some disembodied sort of topical discussion, but the conversation around divorce has come frighteningly close to a lot of us. Now, in verse 31, here Jesus is making an obscure reference to an obscure passage in Deuteronomy 24. I highly recommend you read it sometime. We don't have time to unpack it, but this is what we talked about last week.

Jesus is saying, "You've heard it said, I tell you the truth." He's not only referring to Old Testament law, but in many cases, misinterpretations of that law. So let's unpack some terms here, just so we're all clear. We talked about a certificate of divorce. This was essentially like a pink slip of sorts that a husband was allowed to give his wife at any time, and the passage talks about it being for something indecent. This was about—this passage here—the aftermath of divorce and mitigating its devastating effect on women in ancient society. Jesus here is talking about referencing this passage in Deuteronomy 24. Here's how to guard against the oppression of women.

I didn't know this until preparing, but under Babylonian law, a man could reclaim his wife after divorce for up to five years, because in that context, in that culture, she was little more than property. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses is saying, "At least give her a document to say that she's free to remarry."

Now, again, this is really important to recognize in Jesus' day. There was a heated debate about that phrase, "something indecent". In Deuteronomy 24, most rabbis agreed that it meant adultery. But a generation before Jesus, there was sort of this "rock star Rabbi"—which existed, that's a thing I just made up—a rock star Rabbi named Hallel who introduced a radical new Jesus-argues-wrong interpretation, that something indecent

was actually way broader than that, and introduced and implemented something called "any-reason divorce".

So at the time of Jesus, in first-century Jewish context, a man could divorce a woman for almost any reason, literally—if she like burnt the dinner, if he found her displeasing to look at, if she looked at him or someone else wrong... In some cultures, if she listen to Nickelback, like, it would be... Sorry, I needed us to come for air for a second.

Jesus here, in Matthew, is saying, "I know the popular interpretation right now, and I'm telling you the right way to interpret it." He's saying if you divorce just because she's not pleasing to you, in Jesus' mind, that's adultery. He's addressing the byproduct of objectification and oppression of women. I don't mean this to sound too heavy-handed, but I think they're connected. I think it starts at objectification, but the common end to objectification is oppression.

Now, I realize, especially in the English, at first blush, it sounds like Jesus is saying you can only get a divorce if your spouse has an affair. And some of us may be thinking, "What about desertion? Doesn't Paul talk about that somewhere?" Or maybe we're thinking, "What about the case of abuse?" And I do need to say this: if you're in a relationship and you are physically in harm, if you are being abused, you need to get to safety. Find people who will rally, protect you, and walk alongside you.

I'm just saying this as your pastor and as your friend, and these are all great questions for another time. In fact, in Matthew 19, Jesus actually goes into depth on this conversation about divorce and remarriage. And that's actually not what he's doing here. If you'd like a book to read, by the way, I highly recommend "Divorce and Remarriage in the Church" by David Brewer. It's a short read. It's an incredibly helpful treatment about a very hot button issue.

But here in Matthew 5, Jesus is not giving an in-depth, comprehensive answer to divorce and remarriage. He's not answering the question, "When can I get a divorce?" He's tackling lust and an easy divorce culture that favored men over women. He's calling his followers, his apprentices to a different view of marriage.

He wants them to understand it's not a contract, it's a covenant. It's something else entirely. It's not just a declaration of present love, as important as that is; it's the promise of future love. He's wanting to elevate in their mind. He's challenging them to ask the question if they had a high view or a low view of marriage, because what he's getting at... He's saying to hold marriage in low regard is to also hold contempt for God.

Because ultimately, and I believe this with all my heart, when the two become one, who does that? It's not the bride and groom. It's not even the pastor or the priest. It's God himself. God himself makes the two into one, which, by the way, Genesis says "the two should become one", not "the halves become whole." Okay? You're not incomplete. Marriage does not make you whole—Jesus does, right? That's good news for all of us.

But he's asking them to raise and elevate marriage, in their mind and in their culture. Jesus says, "You must regard her as more valuable than your culture does right now." This is a call to honor women—not to objectify, not to abuse. That's what's happening here in Matthew 5. Okay.

Are we okay? You want to move on to oaths? Perfect. I'm sure that's what you're asking for. Matthew chapter 5, verse 33.

"Again, you have heard that it was said"—again, referring to something they would have known—"You've heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath,' but fulfill the Lord the vows you have made. But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

So, again, personally, this is one of those passages where at first I feel like I'm off the hook. Like, I have not taken an oath in quite some time. Right? I'm not passing out oaths all the time. And some interpretations actually have this passage where some Christians,

throughout history, they could never testify in court because they can't swear on a Bible. Some thought it meant they can't say bad words.

Again, remember, Jesus is being hyperbolic to make a much bigger point. He's referencing Leviticus 19, if you want to dive in and read that. And part of what they were doing is they knew better than to swear by God, so they picked something slightly lower, like heaven, the earth, the Holy City, my head. Some of us might say, 'I swear on my mother's grave.' Jesus is ultimately getting at: "I know what you're doing and people know what you're doing."

At this time in history, there was no DocuSign, there was no signatures, there was no fax machine, so keeping your word had huge implications. Does anyone know anyone who's always like, "I swear, I swear, I swear." Right? Or how about this experience, when someone is in the middle of a story and then they start saying, like, "Trust me, honestly, trust me." And I'm like, I thought you were being honest until you said it 17 times. What was the last 20 minutes of our conversation—was that not honest? We give away our insincerity when we do these things.

And that is what Jesus is going after. He's going after the people that thought they could bluff their way through by invoking a higher power. He's ultimately saying, "Listen, heaven, the city of Jerusalem, whatever... Who do you think owns all that anyway?" God does.

And I thought about this: why do people practice lying? Honestly, there's probably an endless list of reasons, but here are a couple that kind of stood out to me. One, to make ourselves look better, right? Like, exaggerating a story makes me seem a little cooler. I love my grandma, but one of the most common phrases that she tells us is, "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." No? Is anyone else Irish? Yeah, like we exaggerate a little bit to make ourselves seem a little more heroic than we actually were, the circumstances a little more dire.

Two, sometimes we lie to protect ourselves from consequences, right? We know that we've been caught, or we think we've been caught, and so to protect ourselves. And third, maybe to gain something that we want, like a good grade or promotion or tax benefits.

Whatever it is, Jesus is saying, "Let your word be your bond." He's saying don't add weight to a weak commitment by bolstering with additional words that make you sound more committed than you actually are. If you don't want to go, tell them no. "No" is a complete sentence, by the way. This passage forces us to look in the mirror and ask ourselves: Are my words trustworthy or manipulative? Do my words support or contradict my actions? And maybe the most important one: can I be counted on for what I commit to?

We live in such a loosey-goosey time right now. Remember, like on Facebook events, it used to be like "yes" or "no". Now there's an option like "interested". You know how many things I'm "interested" in next Saturday? I'm not going to any of them. Right? Let your "yes" be yes, and your "no" be no—not just in speech, but in conduct.

James, the half brother of Jesus, echoes this sentiment in a couple of places. James 3: "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and saltwater? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water." A couple of chapters later: "But above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by Earth or by any other oath. But let your yes be yes and your no be no so that you may not fall under condemnation."

Now, I think this is something beautiful about the ministry of Jesus, because here he is speaking to us about faithfulness. And this is also the same Jesus who is faithful for us all the way to the point of death. And what I find so beautiful in this particular moment, in the sermon is that we were able to trust Christ, not because he simply said he would save us, but because he actually does. And here's the good news.

The good news is that Jesus died for the flaky, the irresponsible, for the betrayers, for the dishonest, for the me-centered people like me. And he also died for those who take pride in the fact that they aren't any of those things, or so they believe. Both sides, both kinds of people, both with different track records, rap sheets, whatever—he died for all of them.

Okay, now it's time to jump into retaliation. Are you still with me? All right, let's get it. Matthew 5:38.

It has been said that few passages of Scripture summarize Christian ethics more succinctly than these verses. But it could also be said that few passages are more misunderstood. I think that the ten verses or so we're about to dive into are simultaneously the most admired and also the most resented. So it begins here. Matthew 5, verse 38.

"You've heard that it was said, an eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek." Also, anyone heard of this notion, this idea of turning the other cheek? Yes. Even if you're not a Christian or into this Bible or Jesus or church, you've probably heard of that phrase before.

Now, we don't live under an oppressive regime. So again, there's some context here. I'm going to nerd out for a while here, if that's okay. All right. So have your pen ready if it's helpful, or take a nap. And we'll see you in 20 minutes.

Each of these instances are dealing with specific cultural realities that this audience would have been very familiar with. So we have to do some translating and transposing. Now he's referring to Leviticus 24. And it's in Latin. It's called "lex talionis", which means "the law of retaliation". And it was a law intended for Israel's judges, but teachers were using it as a way of exacting personal justice. So just so that we're clear, when it was instituted, eye-for-an-eye was actually a huge leap forward. It sounds barbaric to our modern sensibilities, but historically, before eye-for-an-eye was instituted in Leviticus, the rule was, you take my eye, I take your eye and all your limbs and probably your cattle. Right? It was typical. Like we keep escalating the violence. And so eye-for-an-eye was meant to prohibit unjust retaliations. It was about retribution and vengeance.

Now, Old Testament laws actually fit into a couple of different categories. This falls under the law, the category of civil law. And it was meant to be used legally, not personally. And again, it was a huge leap forward. But Jesus says that's not enough, as Jesus often does. He says that's not the heart of the issue. And so he takes it even a step further.

Now, a quick caveat, because I actually haven't heard a lot of sermons preached on this, but I've seen a lot of abuse of this particular text: "I tell you, do not resist an evil person." Most of us are aware the Bible was not written in English. If that's new to you... Spoiler alert. It wasn't written in English. I'm sorry. And sometimes I think translations can actually be really unhelpful. This is one of those cases.

"Do not resist an evil person." Depending on how skeptical you are, some have made the case that this was translated from the King James because there was actually an attempt to subjugate the British monarchy. And so this phrase "Do not resist evil" I think is actually a bad translation because it makes it sound like Jesus is telling us to roll over and play dead, right?

We know from the life of his ministry that's not the case because Jesus is regularly resisting evil in other places. So what does that word actually mean? The word resist here is the word "antistenai". Can I say it? Let me try and say it one more time.

"Antistenai". There we go. Let me hear you say, "Antistenai". You ought to better than I did just then. One lexicon defines it as "to engage in revengeful or violent retaliation." The word "resist" here means to engage in revengeful or violent retaliation. Jesus isn't telling us to be passive—he's telling us not to be vindictive. That's a big difference. He's not suggesting that we let people walk all over us, but in full Jesus fashion, he's teaching enemy love with imagination.

He's teaching us to refuse to oppose evil on its own terms. That's what he's getting at here. So, again, this whole idea of slapping, I don't feel like just simply saying it is enough. I feel like we should model, on this platform, someone being slapped. That makes sense, right?

So I'm actually going to let you all vote who we bring up on the stage to slap here in a second. There's two people you can vote for. So if you'd like to see Pastor Craig on the stage, by way of applause, let me hear it for Pastor Craig. People are whistling. I don't know what that says about him. Okay, who thinks that should bring Pastor Stone up on stage? So I actually assumed that would be the case, and so I've already preemptively

asked. Pastor Stone, would you come to the stage for a second, please, wherever you're at?

There he is. Please welcome Pastor Stone to the stage. And it's a little embarrassing. We did not plan to match today. So if we could color correct this in post so it doesn't look like that. All right, so I want you to really pay attention to some of the things that are happening here. Pastor Stone, if you would face me. Okay.

So in the passage, it talked about striking someone on the right cheek. Now, what you may not know is that in this context, in a high honor-shame culture, you would only ever strike with the right hand because the left was the wiping hand. Is that too gross? In fact, if you struck someone with a left hand, in some context, you could be banished for ten days. It was a serious offense. You did not strike with a left hand at all. So when Jesus talked about striking someone on the right cheek, what would I have to do in order to strike Pastor Stone on the right cheek? What kind of hit is that? It's a backhand.

Now, again, we don't love backhand, but I think there's some context that we miss because a backhand was not just simply meant to injure, it was meant to shame. It was a strike not for an equal, but a subordinate. This is like an abusive master to a slave, an abusive husband to a wife. It was not just simply meant to harm them. It was meant to put them in their place. So imagine this, right? I'm not really going to hit him. Some of you are waiting with bated breath, like your phones are out. Don't tag me, whatever you do.

All right, so I backhand Pastor Stone. And Jesus says what you are to do now is not fight or flight. It's not punching back, and it's not running and cowering. What does he say to do?

He says, turn and show to him the other cheek. Now, what is so striking, especially standing right here, if Stone is to turn and show me his other cheek, what does he have to do first? He has to look me in the eyes, is what he has to do.

He has to look me in the eyes as now if to say to the abuser, "Listen, you can harm my body, but you cannot take my dignity. I am made in the image and likeness of God, and

whatever you do to me physically cannot be taken from me spiritually." He's now forcing the abuser to confront him as an equal. So if he shows me his other cheek, my only option now, because I can't hit with my left, is to punch him, to strike him as an equal. It's as if to say, "You can try and shame me in front of all these people. You can try to denigrate me. You can do all the things you're trying to do to put me in my place. But nothing can take the fact that I was made in the image and likeness of a God who loves me and sees me. You will not shame me. You will not diminish me."

That's what turning the other cheek does. Can we give it up for Pastor Stone, please, for modelling so well? By turning the other cheek, it made the abuser look them in the eye and the abuser could now only hit them with the fists as an equal, which does two things: it forces the abuser to think twice. One: "I just hit this guy. Now everyone's watching. Am I going to hit him again? I'd start to look bad."

It also says, "I refuse to escalate the violence because I care about you, even though you're my enemy." By turning the other cheek, it's saying, "I'm a human being made in the image and likeness of God, and you cannot destroy that." You make sure the person looks you in the eyes and sees your sacred humanity.

Can you imagine the courage and the self restraint that would actually take to do? What would that look like to witness? Jesus here is not talking about retaliation or retraction. He's painting for us a beautiful third way.

Anne Lamott says it this way: "Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back." Forgiveness—true forgiveness, by the way—it finally becomes unimportant that I don't actually have any need now at a cosmic, ontological level to hit you back to get even.

He goes on in verse 40: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well." Again, in our context, that seems really odd. But in Jesus' day you could take someone to court for your shirt, but it was illegal to sue someone for your coat. The reason was because your coat—picture not just like a coat, like a parka or windbreaker, picture like

a robe—that was your last line of defense. That was the only protection you had at night when it got cold. And only the poor were subject to this kind of abuse.

The poor person, having nothing at all, could be taken to court for their outer garments. So Jesus is telling impoverished debtors who have nothing but the clothes on their back to strip naked and expose the greed of the repo man. He's saying, "Give of your own volition. Expose their grief, their oppression, their ruthlessness."

Now, nakedness was actually taboo for the Jews, but the shame fell less on the naked party and more on the person who looked on or caused the nakedness. This is the beautiful, brilliant way of Jesus... It's kind of Jesus' way of saying, "You want my shirt? You can have it. In fact, take my undies too. There you go. You clearly need it more than I do, right?"

Again, imagine watching that scene unfold. It's a way of saying, "Listen, you clearly need this more than I do. But you cannot have my soul or my dignity." It was also an expression of Kingdom generosity. "You see me for my shirt, I'm going to go even further." It doesn't respond in a counter suit. He almost looks at the person, suing them with pity, with compassion. "I can't imagine what it must be like to be in your position now."

Ideally, a suit would never be necessary. A man would often pledge his tunic as security on a debt and then pay the debt when it came due, and the lien on his tunic would be released. But Jesus says, if you mess that process up and someone actually has to sue you to get what they have coming to them, go out of your way to make it right. Do more than what is required of you in that moment. This is the spirit that Zacchaeus showed when he became a follower of Jesus and he said to Jesus, in Luke 19, "If I cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." We, as Christ followers, followers of the way, ones who live in this Kingdom, need to follow Zacchaeus' example.

When we offend someone, when we find ourselves to be in the wrong, we need to do more than is required to make it right. To get really personal... for some of you, your boss is a legitimate bully, right? Some of you, your place of employment might be oppressive or insensitive. When that happens, do more than is required. Will your boss notice? Maybe. I

don't know. That kind of kindness, that kind of Kingdom generosity, it might not ever change them, but I guarantee it'll change you. You might not ever see the needle move in any direction with those people, but I guarantee it will change you to do more than is required of you. Because we serve a different master. We live in a different Kingdom.

Moving on. Verse 41. "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." Again, we're in the era of power walks and stuff, and that feels weird. Who would force someone to go walking with them—to take them hostage to go for a stroll, a walk? That seems really odd. So first we have the personal attack, then we have a legal attack. This one is an attack on convenience.

Now, under Roman law, it's specified that civilians had to walk one mile. Keep in mind, there was no humvees or anything. So the soldiers had these heavy packs. And so at any time they could call on a civilian to walk with them one mile. Now, this is just conjecture, but I imagine the exchange going something like this. The soldier would say, "Carry this, you Jewish scum." I can't imagine they were asking very nicely. And I imagine often the response was, "Fine, you Roman pig. But not a step further." Right? And you're like counting steps, and as soon as you get to a mile, you would slam the pack on the ground and you would walk away.

Or you could fight back. There was a group called the Sicario. It was a group of Jewish extremists, and I think it simply just translates to "dagger men". And they would sneak up on these soldiers and slit their throats and then slink back into the darkness. And in fact, going a second mile was an infraction of military code. It would be absurd for a Jew in particular to befriend an occupying soldier and then want to walk an extra mile with them. It's a beautiful scene to imagine a soldier asking, or maybe more appropriately, demanding for his backpack after a mile and the person insisting, "I'm going to go an extra mile with you. I'm going to walk with you."

Going the extra mile now is like cliché, right? I imagine a lot of us had it like watercolored over our living room couch or something like that. But it would have been scandalous in the first century. This would have been unheard of. And again, it might not do anything for them or it might break the chain and pattern of abuse. It might break this myth of

redemptive violence, that if I can do the bare minimum, if I keep one-upping the violence... This is the Kingdom-heart of God, seeking the blessing of those who would use their authority to manipulate and control because we are a part of a different Kingdom.

If you have a job or a marriage or kids or friends or neighbors or have left your house ever, I guarantee you will have some opportunity to live this principle out. And then he goes on, as if that's not enough, verse 42, "Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." It's essentially saying, how important is treasure here if I'm laying up treasure in heaven? It's the recognition that everything I have is a gift on loan to me in the first place. The question for the Christ follower isn't, "God, how much of my money do I have to give?" The question is, "God, how much of your money do I get to keep? It's all yours." Not just money, by the way. Every breath, every talent, every gift, every resource, everything we have is a gift on loan to us.

The Kingdom-heart practices generosity because I'm not bound by my possessions. I own my things, but they don't own me. And it looks at the soul of another and says, "You, as a soul made in the image and likeness of God, are more important than these things." In Jewish custom, it would be normal to give to your friends. But here Jesus is saying this person doesn't even need to be your friend. This could be a stranger. And I get all of the pushback. I get all the questions that we ask. What if they don't use it wisely? I get all of that.

I can't help but wonder, though, that when we do that, sometimes we're admitting that those things own me more than I own them. We need this kind of imagination, this third way of Jesus. And Jesus abhors passivity and violence. So he carves out this third way that is neither submission or assault, neither fight or flight.

Now, this is a teaching not for the empire—it's for followers of Jesus, followers of the apprentices of Jesus. And the problem is, I think for so many of us, our imaginations are captive to the ways of escalating violence. Can we just be honest? We all love a good revenge story, right? I imagine why there's like 37 John Wicks. There's something innate in us that loves to see how the bad guy got his due.

But Jesus is opening our imaginations. He's forcing us to reject the easy, binary, either-or trap that the world regularly puts in front of us. Does anyone know what I'm talking about? It's always, "If you're not for me, you're against me. If you vote, talk, act, think, believe differently than me, then you're dead to me."

The world continues to perpetuate these easy, binary, either-or categories. And Jesus says, "No, no, there's a third, beautiful way." Now, I know when it comes to conversations of violence or retaliation, again, much like divorce, that for many of us, this is not a hypothetical scenario. It's not such a word study. It's deeply emotional. My guess is many people even listening to me now, your emotion might be anger. Your emotion might be shame, or guilt, or confusion. And I don't have time to get into all of the implications.

But let me just say this is what I love about this church. This is a safe place to work these things out, to be in community, to dive deep, like, "Okay. What does it actually mean to pursue this radical third way of Jesus? How does it actually work with my line of work or my background or my context or my wiring or my policies? What do I do then?" If you'd like another book recommendation—there's two book recommendations in one Sunday, which is too many—the book "Fight" by Preston Sprinkle. I highly recommend that to you if you're interested in this third way of Jesus and what that could potentially look like for us, in the here and now. I highly recommend it to you.

And so I'm going to end now with maybe the most difficult part. And I'll be honest, I've been almost grieving this part of the sermon, knowing that I know this is where Jesus loses a lot of us. I know that. But as your pastor and friend, I beseech you to at least consider the words he says here in verse 43. Jesus says, "You've heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." How good is that? The righteous and unrighteous, they still get sunshine and rain.

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others. Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Now again, Jesus is referring to Leviticus 19:18. It's also quoted in the Great Commandment, as many of us know. And the question that was often raised in a first century context is, "Who is my neighbor?" Right? And the common answer was, "Other Jewish people like me." In the pretty famous parable of the Good Samaritan, there was actually a version of that that existed before Jesus told it. And the third character in the story was your common everyday Jew. So you had these two religious people that didn't care for the person.

So who really was a neighbor? Your common everyday Jew. And Jesus inverts all of that and makes the third character the Samaritan, which would have been scandalized. But the question remains: "Who is my neighbor?" Now you might be thinking, "Wait, he says, 'You've heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' Did I miss the 'hate your enemy' part in the Bible? I don't remember that being in there." It's actually not in there. What he's addressing here is something that had become a Jewish idiom. It was a case of inference. The inverse of "love your neighbors" is "hate your enemy."

That was just what they began to believe and practice. He said, "You've heard it said"—that's actually not even in the text. Now, the word enemy is the word "ekthron", and it means "any and all people you don't get along with". Can anyone think of any names or faces right now?

Personally, politically, professionally... We need both. Now, I love what he does here. He says, "You've heard that it was said, 'love your neighbor, hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It begins singular, but he moves it to plural. Don't just pick that one person that you consider an enemy. He opens the gate. And love, by the way, does not equal tolerance or niceness or feeling warm-fuzzies or sentimentality. It's way more beautiful than that. It's way deeper.

The word "love" here is the word "agape". And agape is a love of the will. It's to will another person's good ahead of your own. Because some of you are thinking of an enemy right now, and you're thinking, "I can't ever imagine feeling warm-fuzzies towards that person," you might not ever actually. That might not ever happen. That's not what he's talking

about. Agape is a love of the will. William Barclay defined it this way: "unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill." Unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill.

And just so we're clear, loving your enemy is not pretending that their behavior doesn't matter. That's not the case. But we love them unto God's formative purpose. "Embrace" does not mean "endorsement". I think we sometimes get in our heads, like, "I've actually loved them. And people might think that I'm in that camp or in that party, or like I subscribe to their particular beliefs." Where does that idea come from? "Embrace" does not mean "endorsement" at all.

And look at the disciples. This is what I love about Jesus. You have Matthew, who's a tax collector who took more taxes than he was supposed to, representing the government and power. And you have Simon, who was a zealot who wanted to violently overthrow that government. Jesus calls both of them to be homies. Modern translations, "disciples." Let's stick with "disciples"—to be disciples. He's saying, "There's something more important than our political affiliation, and that thing is our citizenship in the Kingdom of God."

But how, Jesus? How do we do that? His first suggestion? Pray for them.

Listen, I'll be honest. It is really hard to keep hating someone if you're actually praying for them. Maybe a question we could ask is, "Have I prayed for this person half as much as I've criticized them?" Pray over that person. Whatever you pray for yourself, for your marriage, for your kids, for your favorite people... Pray that over them and see if over time, your heart doesn't begin to change. Pray for the good of your enemy. Yes. Pray for repentance and transformation and healing. Don't pray for their demise, though.

Don't be like, "Pray for your enemy? Got it. I pray a piano falls on their head this afternoon." Right? That's not what he's talking about here. He's talking about praying for their wholeness. Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to pray for them. And they're not two different commands. They're linked. Can we see that one of the main vehicles by which we love our enemies is to pray for them?

Because in that sacred act, the Lord transforms our heart. This is so foreign to how we actually react. And this is what I find so beautiful. In verse 45, it says, "that you may be children of your Father." That's the why.

Why should I live like this? That seems insane. That doesn't seem practical. Why? That we might be children of heaven. Why do we love our enemies? Because that's what God is like." While we were still sinners." When we love our enemy, we become more like our Father.

It makes me think of a story of a man named Daryl Davis, who was a black piano player, and he began befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan, just having lunch with them, having coffee with them. Over the course of years now, dozens of these men have surrendered their robes, their Ku Klux Klan ceremonial robes, to him because they found a better way. And the backlash on both sides has been bizarre. "You can't have coffee with them. You can't have lunch with them. Are you serious?"

Think about the criticisms that people always had for Jesus. "Your Rabbi eats and drinks with those people." Their issue, by the way, wasn't that he was serving them. It's that he was associated with them. And the invitation of Jesus is not charity—it's family. There's a difference. When we love our enemies, when we pray for those who would want to do us harm, we become more like our Father. If you only love people in your nation, tradition, style, camp, ethnicity, class, party, denomination, you're no better than the tax collector or the pagan. This is why the religious people got so mad.

So the answer was verse 48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." That's your action item for this week. Go be perfect. See you guys.

Yeah, maybe you're thinking, "Okay, what am I actually supposed to do with that?" That's the climax, by the way. Remember, that's the climax of enemy love. The word perfect is the word "telos", which means "complete, whole, mature, full development". It means to reach an intended end or completion. In other words, a person is "telos" if he or she fulfills the purpose for which they were created. And I don't mean to be too reductionistic. The end

goal of apprenticeship to Jesus is to become more and more like Jesus. That's the aim, not just to check more theological, doctrinal boxes.

The litmus test of being like Jesus is enemy love. The litmus test, the barometer of "Am I actually being with and becoming more like Jesus?" Is how do I actually treat people who would do me harm that the rest of the world overlooks? The Apostle Paul says in Romans 5: "But God demonstrated his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." When we were still enemies, when we hadn't got our life together, we hadn't joined a small group, we hadn't started tithing—none of it. While we were still sinners, while we were still caught in our sin.

1 John 4: We love, why? Because he first loved us. That's the beauty of the gospel. It's not about us leaving here and trying to be better at loving people. It's recognizing that while I could do nothing to earn, deserve, or merit God's favor, his love, his affection, his acceptance... He comes after us again and again and again. And so the question you might be asking is, does that actually work?

Does that actually work? How does Jesus win us over? Through self-sacrificial, cross-shaped, suffering love. And whether it works or not, it's the way of Jesus.

And I'll be honest, in the short term, it might not look like it's winning. It might not look like it's working, but in the long term, it absolutely will. Jesus does not promise that our life will go well for us. Look what happened to Jesus. Honestly, living like this led him to a cross—a shameful, brutal, embarrassing execution.

Jesus's invitation is not a safe, secure, middle-class, suburban existence. It's to love those that the rest of the world says are not worth your time. In fact, prior to Constantine, "Love your enemy" was the most quoted verse in all the Bible by the Church fathers. And yet somewhere along the way, we've sort of reasoned it out and we've explained away how Jesus couldn't actually mean that.

Friends, "love your enemies" was not hyperbolic. It was not metaphoric. And it was not a suggestion for those who were living in the Kingdom. So if we were to love our enemies,

maybe ask these questions: one, who are my enemies? And secondly, what am I doing to turn them into neighbors?

We are never more like our Father than when we are actually loving those who don't love us, when we refuse to retaliate, even if the other person is wrong, when we seek to make restitution for our wrongs, when we respond to mistreatment with kindness, when we extend generosity to all that need it. That's how we show this love. Because ultimately, how does Jesus defeat his enemies? By dying on a cross? That's how he did it.

We all fall under the grace of the Kingdom, which means we can look into the eyes of a Centurion and see not a beast, but a child of God. We can look into the eyes of a tax collector and see their true poverty. The gospel frees us to look into the eyes of someone we hate and see the One we love. This is less about commands or laws. It's an illustration of a life shaped by the Kingdom.

Because ultimately, I only love God as much as the person I love least. That's what Jesus gets after. "What you do to the least of these, you're doing to me. What you're doing to the person you perceive to be your enemy, you're doing to me."

You only love God as much as you really love the person you love the least. That's what he's getting at here. And we can do this—we can live with this kind of love, not because we learned a new set of skills, but because God first loved us and comes after us.

I'll close with this story. There was a writer named Max Lucado, and he tells a story about this big, buff, muscle-bound guy. Just picture me. That'll help you. Your laughter hurts. And this guy named Daniel, and he was, like, massively swindled by his brother in a really brutal way. And he vowed that if he ever saw his brother again, he'd break his neck. That was the animosity. That was the anger. That's what was there.

Well, a couple of months later, this dude Daniel, has a radical encounter with Jesus, like a Holy Spirit upside-down, and he becomes a Christian. And yet he recognizes, "I still can't forgive my brother." There's this one piece that he's holding onto. And then one day, randomly, he spots his brother across the street. This is what Daniel describes.

He says, "I saw him, but he didn't see me. I felt my fist clench and my face get hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the life out of him. But as I did and looked into his face, my anger began to melt. For as I saw him, I saw the image of my father. I saw my father's eyes. I saw my father's look. I saw my father's expression. And as I saw my father in his face, my enemy once again became my brother."

Here's what Lucado says about that story. "The brother found himself wrapped in those big arms, but not in a choke, but a hug. The two stood in the middle of a river of people and just wept. Daniel's words bear repeating: 'When I saw the image of my father in his face, my enemy became my brother.'"

Would you pray with me, please? God, I know that there are countless stories of wrong that has been done to us. Legitimate wrong. There is shame. There's guilt. God, would you remind us that in the Kingdom, we get to surrender all of that to you? Your love for us is not based on our performance for you. That's really good news. God, whatever thing, whatever person that right now, in this moment, we're perceiving as our enemy, would you help us to see the face of our Father and that person and those people? Whatever that might be, God, would you begin to melt away the anger and the hurt and the vengeance and the shame? God, we know those are not from you. By your grace, by your spirit, God, would you help us, enable us to live in the Kingdom—in the upside-down ways of the Kingdom? God, we thank you and we love you, and we pray these things in the beautiful name of Jesus, and everybody said, "Amen."