

Epiphany VII: Matthew 5:38-48: The Heart Must be Devoid of Vengeance and Hatred

1. At this point Ylvisaker summarizes Mt. 5:21-48 thus: "In five sections and by means of five different illustrations Jesus has demonstrated the truth that the righteousness which He demands of His disciples must conform not only to the external letter, but also to the inner spirit of the Law. He opens with 'brother' and closes with 'enemies'. He begins with the less difficult, and concludes with that which is more perplexing. The first three sections, which deal with the fraternal relation (21-26), the conjugal connection (27-32), and with man's attitude to God (33-37) is treated from the negative point of view (thou shalt not); the last two, which teach us not to be self-seeking: a) in the domain of the Law (38-42), b) in the realm of love (43-48), are positive (an eye for an eye. . . thou shalt love thy neighbor). There is an inner systematic and logical progression. The process of reasoning is simple, easily comprehended, and yet withal so profound." Well said.
2. We repeat: Jesus is here teaching no more, no less, than the OT teaches. He is not a new Law-giver.
3. Vs. 38: The passage was correctly quoted by Jesus' contemporaries but wrongly applied, thus leading people away from true heart-righteousness. Read Ex. 21:24-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21. Hendriksen: "This was a law for the civil courts, laid down in order that the practice of seeking private revenge might be discouraged. The OT passages do not mean 'Take personal revenge whenever you are wronged.' They mean the exact opposite 'Do not avenge yourself but let justice be administered publicly.'" Ylvisaker: "The Lord does not in this section argue against the laws of society as such." It was the lex talionis, the law of retribution, civil, not moral law. *Apology*, Art. XVI, 7, Tappert, 223: "Public redress through a judge is not forbidden but expressly commanded, and it is a work of God according to Paul (Rom. 13:1ff)." Lenski: "The (civil) law is not placed into our hands but is taken out of them."
4. Vs. 39: ἐγὼ: emphatic pronoun. δὲ "but". λέγω ὑμῖν: The God-man speaks with divine authority. Then follows a negative command: "Don't ever resist the wicked man." All translations, except AV and LB, correctly translate "one who is evil" or its equivalent, not "evil". And πονηρὸς means "actively evil", "one who wrongs another person". Evil must always be resisted. Jesus is condemning vengeance, returning evil for evil, as did the OT: Lev. 19:18; Prov. 24:29. To do so is to have an evil heart. A judge or jury must make decisions on the basis of law and justice only, not from an evil heart. In every dealing with people, vengeance is always sin. As a citizen, a Christian must do all he can to maintain the security of the State and the promotion of the public welfare. From 39b-42 Jesus gives four examples of how the Christian must deal with others in interpersonal relationships, always devoid of vengeance. ἀλλά, following a negative means "but quite to the contrary." Here we are dealing with the Christian in the Kingdom of grace, not the Kingdom of power. Bengel: "The words of Christ belong not merely to human and natural life but to the eternal life. Our Lord gives examples of private (39), legal (40) and political (41) wrong done to the Christian." To turn the other cheek simply means not to be vengeful but rather to return good for evil. Jesus is stressing attitude, not mechanical action. At Jn. 18:22, when Jesus is slapped, He did not mechanically turn the other cheek, but gave an answer which was devoid of anger and resentment, spoken for the good of the one who slapped Him. The earliest pre-school childhood memory of the author of these notes is an occasion on which, at mother's orders, his sister restrained him from running out into the street. When he slapped her and said: "I hate you" she smiled, put her arms around him and said: "But I love you." An indelible memory. Sister did precisely what Jesus meant in vs. 39b, though she did not mechanically turn the other cheek. Fahling asks: "Does this mean that all outrages should henceforth go unchallenged? There is a time to submit, but there is also a time to fight. Passive behavior ceases when it comes into conflict with the law of love. Naturally, a Christian's duties to his family,

community, or country may compel him to resist rather than to submit to injustice and insult. But that is not the point in the present consideration."

5. Vs. 40: καὶ "furthermore" a second example, this time a legal confrontation. τῷ θελόντι σοὶ κριθῆναι "to him who desires that you be taken to court." The case is not yet in court. He is only suing. "And if anyone wants to sue you." Thus NIV, NEB, AAT, NASB, NKJV which are preferable to AV, LB and RSV. The second καὶ "and as a result" or "and so". For what reason? "To get your shirt." A negligible matter which does not end in poverty. You can afford to lose this without great loss. The last part literally: "Allow (give) to him also your cloak." The Christian has a legal right to fight back, but in a negligible matter (which the worldling would consider a matter of cold principle) the Christian is morally bound by the law of love to give double, without strife, to assuage anger and wrath. Cf. I Cor. 6:1ff. True love produces true moral courage, a courage which yields rather than to cause further trouble. The author of these notes once knew two neighbors who went to court over a discrepancy of the property-line (six inches). The case ended indecisively, at great cost to both, in bitter hatred. Both moved away. A legal battle ended immorally.
6. Vs. 41: καὶ "furthermore" a third example, which Bengel calls "a political wrong". ἀγγαρεύω is a verb of Persian origin, taken over by the Greeks and Romans. When a Persian messenger or soldier was on the King's business and needed assistance he could deputize any citizen to help him. NEB reads: "If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two." The point is cheerful submission and assistance, not grudging, forced compliance. A good case in point is that of Simon of Cyrene (Mt. 27:32). The same verb is used. Note that in these first three examples (vss. 39, 40, 41) the true righteousness of the heart is made evident by lovingly returning double. Hendriksen gives a list of examples from the OT: Abraham (Gen 14:14ff), David (I Sam. 24 and 26), Elisha (II Kings 6). True believers in the OT did what God wanted.
7. Vs. 42: Here we have a final example which bridges over into vs. 43. Again, Jesus is not inducing poverty. It deals with the person who makes a request or wants to borrow. Hendriksen says: "When someone in distress asks for assistance, one must not turn a deaf ear to him. On the contrary, says Jesus, give not grudgingly or gingerly but generously; lend, not selfishly, looking forward to usury but liberally, magnanimously. Micah 6:8; Deut. 15:7,8; Ps. 37:26; 112:5; Prov. 19:17." The OT already contained this injunction.
8. Vs. 43: First and foremost read all of Lev. 19:18. Jesus' contemporaries read only a part of this verse. And notice the omission "as yourself". ἀγαπήσεις, a fut. ind., a very strong impv. καὶ μισήσεις τὸν ἐχθρὸν σου, not found in the OT, their companion interpretation to the first part. ἐχθρὸς is the word for personal enemy, as opposed to an enemy in war (πολέμιος). Lev. 19:17 rules such hatred out altogether. That OT believers showed love to Gentiles is clear from such examples as I Kings 17:9; II Kings 5:14. Most commentators express ideas similar to those of Ylvisaker: "The real basis for this fabricated injunction (thou shalt hate thine enemy) is found presumably in the divine regulations regarding the attitude of Israel toward the Amalekites and others who were without the covenant of God (Deut. 7:2ff; 23:6; 25:19). These provisions had been made to apply to the personal relation between enemies. Pharisaism was in this regard not far removed from the morality of the ancients: 'Serve your friend, harm your enemy.'" That may be. Furthermore, Hendriksen adds: "During the time of the exile the attitude of the Jews toward the Gentiles changed." That may be. But the reason lies closer at hand. Because of their unregenerate hearts, Scribes and Pharisees opposed the words πλησίων and ἐχθρὸς to each other, very unlike Lev. 18:19. Furthermore, they omitted "as thyself" which led to the question asked at Lk. 10:29, a very revealing question. This led to a total lack of love, even of neighbor (cf. Jn. 7:49 and Lk. 18:11), to self-righteousness which is the death

of both justification and sanctification.

9. Vs. 44: Note that AV and NKJV, unlike the other translations, quote the Koine text, according to the parallel at Lk. 6:27.28. ἐχθροί are personal enemies. Might they on occasion include husband, wife, child, etc.? Yes, whenever someone hates you. ὑμῶν is both objective and genitive of relation. Note that ἀγαπᾶτε is pres. impv., ongoing action. It's not φιλεῖν, the love of friendship. It's the love of the regenerate heart, possible only for such. καὶ introduces a single example. It reminds us immediately of Lk. 23:24 and Acts 7:60. Note that the impv. προσεύχεσθε and the substantive participle διωκόντων are both progressive pres. tense: "Keep on praying in behalf of those who are constantly persecuting (doing evil) you." Ylvisaker: "But to love one's enemies, to help them, and even to pray for them, this can be accomplished only by the heart which has experienced the love of God in Christ Jesus, and is rooted and grounded in this divine love. The strength must come from the Lord Himself." The strongest incentive for loving our enemies is the universal atonement. If Jesus prayed for ALL and thus laid God's anger by, I must follow His example.
10. Vs. 45: ὅπως introduces a purpose clause. γένησθε cannot mean "be" (AV, RSV, NIV, NKJV, NASB, NEB) nor "will become" (TEV) because a Christian is a child of God by grace through faith, not by works. AAT is recommended: "In this way you will show you are true sons etc." γένησθε here means "prove to be". Christians reflect the mercy of the Lord. They don't cause the sun to rise nor the rain to come. They live by the mercy of the Lord and make this mercy evident by their actions. τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν, a double genitive of relation. Not "God" but "Father" which immediately reminds us of redemption in Christ. τοῦ ἐν οὐρανῶς is adjectival, telling us what kind of Father He is. The ὅτι clause is causal and evidential. Lenski suggests "inasmuch as". ἀνατέλλει and βρέχει are both transitive verbs. Without sun and rain, mankind would perish. They remind us daily of His universal love and compassion to men. He makes no exceptions. πονηροὺς καὶ ἀγαθοὺς denote mankind as men view other men: "actively evil and good in character." δικαίους καὶ ἀδίκους denote mankind as God views their hearts: "the justified believers and unjustified unbelievers." AV, NKJV, LB, RSV, NIV, NASB are recommended. Not TEV, JB, NEB and AAT. The true love of God in Christ (Jn. 3:16) which prompts the Christian to love all, even enemies, underlies this verse.
11. Vss. 46 and 47: Are similar: Each is introduced by a rhetorical question which Jesus answers with an οὐχὶ question which demands the answer "yes". Secondly, both draw a sharp distinction between the regenerate selfless man and the unregenerate selfish man. The former serves others, the latter self only. They are dissimilar: The first verb is general, the second more specific. And the first involves the hated publicans while the second involves the hated Gentiles, Goyim, pagans.
12. Vs. 46: Note that ἀγαπᾶω is used also of the unregenerate. In neither case is it φιλέω, the love of friendship. For both believer and unbeliever ἀγάπη is of deliberate purpose. But there the similarity ends. For the unbeliever it is purely quid pro quo, Indian-giving. For the believer it is universal, selfless, motivated by the Holy Spirit. μισθός reminds us immediately of Mt. 5:12. It is as difficult to love those who hate us as it is to endure persecution for Jesus' sake. It is purely a reward of grace.
13. Vs. 47: ἀσπάζησθε means more than "greet". It denotes our whole demeanor when we meet or leave them. TEV is getting at it: "If you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary?" And JB: "And if you save your greetings for your brothers, etc." A lack of genuine friendliness, snubbing people, is a clear indication of an unregenerate heart. How often don't even Christians snub each other!
14. Vs. 48: οὖν is inferential "therefore" a summary statement for everything in vss. 13-47. Here is the

one grand principle. Ἔσεσθε is fut. ind., a very strong imperative. Even this principle was found already in the OT at Lev. 19:2. Note emphatic ὑμεῖς. τέλειοι is translated "perfect" by all the translations. But it needs explanation. Literally it means "having reached the goal". What goal? Of justification and sanctification. Cf. its usage at Phil. 3:15 and James 1:4. It does not mean that the Christian is sinless. The best commentary here is Phil. 3:12-14. He is τέλειος, mature, πνευματικός, spiritual (Gal. 6:1), constantly enjoying freedom from sin, death, the devil and his own flesh. At the same time he is serving and loving his neighbor as himself. The Gospel frees him. The Law obligates him. The Gospel says "Done". The Law says "Do". The Christian is cleansed because of the Gospel. Jn. 15:3-5. He is a branch on the vine and therefore brings forth much fruit. Your heavenly Father is τέλειος, holy in Himself, but also merciful and kind to all in Christ Jesus. Vs. 48 is to be taken literally and is attainable, by the grace of God. Note the little word ὡς. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." The first is our constant standard as to the object of our love. The second constantly reminds us as to the proper attitude of heart. Sunday for Sunday we sing Ps. 51:10-12 as the Offertory. That implies a penitent heart, Ps. 51:1-9. Read II Cor. 5:17-19. What a wondrous blessing it is to be a new creature in Christ!