

Deciding to De-escalate  
Matthew 5:38-48  
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***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 that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don’t refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

**Sermon**

When I started working on this passage a few weeks ago, I had no idea it would be all over the news the past couple of weeks. Here are a couple of headlines after the National Prayer Breakfast a week ago Wednesday, the day after the end of the impeachment hearings:

*Loving Enemies is Hard at Post-Impeachment Prayer Breakfast.  
National Prayer Breakfast Speaker tells audience, including Trump and  
Pelosi: “Love Your Enemies.”*

Harvard University professor Arthur Brooks was the keynoter, and he talked about how important it is, and how hard it is, to love people across the political aisle. It didn't take long after his keynote to see how quickly politicians retaliate when someone strikes out at them. And we can just travel back a couple of days earlier to the State of the Union and see that politicians sometimes struggle to de-escalate difficult situations. And something tells me the primary season isn't going to make it any easier to turn the other cheek or go the extra mile.

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Politicians don't do so well with these difficult words from Jesus.

Oh, and neither do we.

It's no wonder. They're traditionally called “Jesus' hard teachings.” But I think they should be called the Unrealistic Rules, or the Laughable Laws or the Impossible Imperatives. Or maybe the crazy commands.

We should love our enemies? By definition we don't love enemies. If we loved enemies, they would be friends, not enemies. When I was studying this passage, I started to make a list of all the times I have seen someone turn the other cheek or go the extra mile. I'll leave it at this: the list was short. Very short.

These imperatives are impossible...and yet, they are what Jesus demands of us.

*You must not oppose those who want to hurt you.*

There are no conditions on any of these crazy commands. Jesus says to do them. The question is, how?

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Before we get to that question, though, first a caveat. I'm certain that Jesus does not intend that those being abused should turn the other cheek. Spouses being beaten, children and elders being mistreated, employees feeling unsafe—I am sure the Giver of abundant life does not want this abuse to continue. If you are being abused, I hope you'll talk to one of the pastors or take another step toward safety in the very near future.

So let's bracket out situations like these with abuse, and let's focus on more regular slights. I was on vacation last week and had the chance to see Hamilton. Apparently at this particular theater, attendees have the reputation of leaving before shows are over in order to beat the parking. Two of the people I was with said, "If that happens, I'm going to swat them!" Another said, "You can't do that!" And I couldn't keep from thinking about Jesus' words to "turn the other cheek."

What does Jesus call us to do when we don't get a promotion we are certain we deserve? What does it mean to turn the other cheek when our in-laws question the way we raise our kids? How do we go the extra mile when someone we hardly know infuriates us on facebook? How do we love our enemies when they seem so dead-set on taking advantage of us?

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How do we put these impossible imperatives into action, especially when our first response to a slight is to return it in kind. "You didn't send me a birthday card? Well fine, I won't invite you to my party."

This kind of escalation happens so easily. You didn't speak to me at coffee hour? Fine, I'll start talking behind your back. Then you'll invite a friend to lunch so you can unload about me. Then I'll refuse to go to the soup kitchen with you. We escalate, and escalate, and escalate. The impossible imperatives tell us not to escalate. Instead, Jesus would have us de-escalate the conflict in order to strengthen the relationship.

One of the commentators I read said, “Jesus does not want us to fight fire with fire. He wants us to fight fire with water.” Responding in kind only leads to further escalation. Responding more generously, or not responding at all, can de-escalate the conflict and renew the relationship.

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Fighting fire with water can be helpful in living up to the most illogical of the impossible imperatives: That we should love our enemies. As they slight us, as they take advantage of us, as they show their hate for us, we’re supposed to love them? Our hearts are supposed to be filled with warm fuzzies whenever we see them?

I think the work of scholar Everett Worthington can be helpful here. He writes specifically about forgiveness, but I think it applies to loving our enemies as well. Worthington identifies two types of forgiveness. The first is decisional, which he captures as

*Decisional Forgiveness = personal commitment to control negative behavior, even if negative emotions continue.*

Decisional forgiveness means that we decide not to act in revenge, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that we feel any less unforgiving. But it does mean we will not act in unkind ways toward the person who hurt us. When Jesus says to love our enemies, I wonder if this isn’t the first step—to decide that we are not going to take actions to retaliate against those who have hurt us or with whom we disagree. To exercise this kind of forgiveness is to make a decision to de-escalate the conflict between us and our enemies.

The second kind of forgiveness is emotional forgiveness.

*Emotional Forgiveness = negative emotions (resentment, hostility, and even hatred) are replaced by positive feelings*

Maybe one day the negative emotions we have for our enemies will go away, and our heart really will be filled with warm fuzzies. But this takes a lot longer, and it feels a lot more impossible.

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I'm grateful that I got to see this kind of forgiveness in my own family. My stepmother came into my life when I was ten. She had been divorced for a few years beforehand. In so many divorces, ex-spouses become enemies whose conflict escalates dramatically. Sometimes people cannot say a single positive thing about their ex-spouse. In fact, there was a letter to the ethicist column at the *New York Times* last week with the headline, "My Ex-Wife Bad-mouths Me to Our Boys. Can I tell them the Truth about Her?"

Somehow, though, Mom never fell into this trap with her ex-husband, Jackie. I can't remember a single complaint she raised about him. I'd see him at graduations and weddings. We'd often see each other when I went to see my step-sister who lived near him. I don't ever remember him badmouthing Mom, either.

I don't think it was easy for them to de-escalate this conflict. I think they had plenty of negative emotions as they processed the pain they made each other feel during the split. But somehow they decided to de-escalate. They turned the other cheek. They went the extra mile. And when Jackie died, Dad and I were pallbearers. That's right—Jackie's ex-wife's new husband and his son were pallbearers.

My family has had loads of challenges—but in this case, Mom and Jackie gave a great example of what it meant to go the extra mile.

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In fact, they give us a glimpse of how God has worked to de-escalate the conflict which could exist between us and him. God's anger doesn't grow when we return to our sins in no time after the prayer of confession. God doesn't lash out at us or mistreat us; rather God is eager for us to ask forgiveness again, so he can show us grace again. The very nature of this

grace is that no matter how badly we slight God, God does not slight us. God fights the fire of our sin by sending us the water of Christ Jesus.

God comes to us as Christ Jesus, who walked the extra mile, all the way to Calvary. This Jesus turned the other cheek as he was spit on, as the crown of thorns was put on his head, and as he was nailed to the cross. He gave away all he had, so that his enemies could divide his possessions and mock him. Jesus loved his enemies, crying out from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus did not just dole out the Impossible Imperatives; he lived them out. And he does not just order us to live up to them—he empowers us to do what we never thought possible. He strengthens us to de-escalate after the slights in our lives. By his Spirit he equips us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, and to love our enemies. Even in this passage, he reminds us that we are children of our Father in Heaven—and he equips us that our family resemblance with him would be stronger every day.

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That’s why this crazy calling of ours to follow Jesus’ teachings is indeed possible—even if the imperatives seem impossible. It’s even possible when the abuse goes far beyond the slights of every day life that you and I experience most days.

A few years ago I had the chance to spend time in Rwanda, where back in 1994 the Hutu tribe killed almost a million members of the Tutsi tribe in 100 days. That’s about 10,000 people a day, 70% of the Tutsis killed with machetes and clubs. They were the same race and lived in the same geographic region. They were all Christians. The same tradition of Christians.

The same tradition of Christians who read the same words that Jesus has for us, today.

Perhaps that's why some of them could grow to love their enemies. The *New York Times* had a remarkable article a few years ago with pictures of some of the perpetrators and victims who had taken steps toward forgiveness. The article is called, "Portraits of Reconciliation." Here is one of the pairs featured:

**Laurent:** "I participated in destroying her house because we took the owner for dead. The houses that remained without owners — we thought it was better to destroy them in order to get firewood. Her forgiveness proved to me that she is a person with a pure heart."

**Beatrice:** "If I am not stubborn, life moves forward. When someone comes close to you without hatred, although horrible things happened, you welcome him and grant what he is looking for from you. Forgiveness equals mercy."

Deciding on de-escalation may seem like a crazy call from Jesus. But these Rwandans are pursuing it, in situations that seem almost impossible. I saw it on my trip there, too—I met a Tutsi woman whose parents and brothers were all killed by Hutus in her village. She now sponsors Hutu children from that village to go to school. I asked her how in the world she could bring herself to do that. She said simply, "I'm a follower of Jesus. We forgive."

We're followers of Jesus, too. By his strength, we can turn the other cheek. We can go the extra mile. We can love our enemies.

May it be so, by the power of the Holy Spirit.