

Sons of Your Father

Matthew 5:38-48

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Peter Hiatt

Several years ago near the seminary in Pasadena, I stopped to get some lunch at a chicken stand. I was waiting in line when this young, underprivileged, minority youth came up to me. He said, "Man, I'm so hungry. Could you spare just a few bucks so I could get a piece of chicken?"

I looked at him and my heart began to swell with Christian love. I smiled and said, "Sure," as I handed him some cash. As soon as I had handed him the money, his expression entirely changed. He spun around, waving the bills in the air, and yelled to his friends, "Hey guys! I got the money!"

He and his buddies ran off laughing, as everybody at the chicken stand gave me the *look*. The look meant this: "You are the most gullible, bleeding heart liberal, stupid philanthropist I've ever seen. And what does your charity accomplish? Now these boys are rewarded with booze and drugs, while they learn the value of lies and irresponsibility and that crime pays. What kind of society do you want to produce? What's *wrong* with you?"

I felt stupid . . . and I was.

If we are to be God's servants accomplishing His will on earth, shouldn't we think through the results of our actions? Every school kid learns "the strong survive." And life itself is the result of the "will to power" . . . not stupid philanthropy.

Indiscriminate giving is suicide.

George Bush said, “The free people must rule the world. In order to do that, we need a strong military.” In Scripture, Israel had a strong military without, and enforced justice and responsibility within, in order to protect life and produce the great society.

In Leviticus 24 God says, “. . . fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured. . . . Whoever kills a man must be put to death. You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.”

In Matthew 5:38 Jesus says, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’*” (Yes, God said it.) “*But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.*”

Well, Jesus presents us with several crises.

First, just who does Jesus think He is? Either He is God, or the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most arrogant, deluded, and evil pieces of literature in all history. Jesus quotes God and then says, “But I say to you . . .” Who does He think He is?

Secondly, doesn’t He care for God’s people Israel? Israel was an occupied country, and it was Roman law that a Roman soldier could make a Jew carry his burden one mile. Jesus is saying, “Carry it two.” Don’t resist. Remember that the Jews

tried to *make* Jesus a king, but Jesus refused to be involved in a military revolt for the country of Israel.

I often get stuff in the mail from churches begging us to support the military conquest and settlement of old Israel by Jews. How bizarre is that? “Do what Jesus didn’t do, and instead of turning a cheek, turn a tank.”

But this is a third crisis: Jesus seems to redefine the Old Testament. An “eye for an eye” is no longer our law. And . . .

Who *is* Israel?

Who is truly a Jew?

Who is a child of Abraham?

What is this New Jerusalem coming down?

Jesus *is* King of the Jews. But His kingdom is not of this world.

If you’re a Christian, you must read the Old Testament in the light of Christ, or you’re reading it as one under the law condemned under the law. Yet that doesn’t mean you can blow off the law! Jesus just said He came to fulfill the law and the prophets. Well, how does He fulfill “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”? How does He fulfill the promises to Israel?

You see, Jesus is a crisis. It’s no wonder He got crucified. *And* He’s a crisis for us.

To be slapped on the cheek was the height of insult. Jesus says, “Let them insult you some more.” In that day a normal peasant only owned one tunic and one cloak. The cloak was the only possession under Old Testament law to which every Jew had a right. Jesus is saying, “Give up all your rights.”

If someone sued for your tunic, and then you handed them your cloak, you'd be standing buck-naked in a court of law before all those witnesses! "And if the Roman oppressor makes you walk a mile, go two," says Jesus. "If anyone begs from you, give. If anyone wants to borrow, don't turn away."

Doesn't Jesus realize that if you really believed this, that after one trip to Tijuana, Mexico or downtown Denver, you could basically lose everything and end up looking like . . . Mother Teresa or St. Francis of Assisi? That's entirely impractical for wealthy Americans like us!

The way the Roman Catholic Church dealt with this problem was to divide Jesus' commands between "precepts" and "counsels," so that verses like these were only meant for "special orders": monks, nuns, and St. Francis and Mother Teresa-types seeking perfection.

Many Dispensationalists say the Sermon on the Mount really isn't even *for* us but for Messianic Israel. Israel didn't go for it, so then Jesus went with the whole dying on the cross thing. So many say these verses don't really apply to us, but then they quote a lot of Old Testament verses about blessing Israel. So they bless Israel with guns and tanks and blow off the Sermon on the Mount.

Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and most Protestant denominations said and say, "These verses certainly do apply to us as individuals, but not as officers in a government." They point to Romans 12 and 13 where Paul talks about our individual duty to never avenge ourselves, but then talks about the fact that government has been given a sword as a minister of God, to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

So the reformers argued that a soldier or police officer doesn't turn the other cheek, for it's not their cheek to turn. They're acting on another's behalf.

It is interesting that Jesus didn't say, "If someone slaps your daughter on the cheek, let him slap her on the other cheek." Policemen and soldiers use force to save our cheeks. It even appears Jesus used force on behalf of another. He made a whip and chased moneychangers from the temple, who were insulting His Father and all nations.

Well, Anabaptists, Mennonites, Amish, and other pacifists say these verses should not be limited *at all*. The serious pacifists would argue that if a madman is threatening your daughter with a gun, you shouldn't shoot him, but you should trust the results of your pacifism to God. Real, Biblical pacifists are not cowards but are supremely courageous, hoping to glorify Christ by dying well.

Perhaps the most famous commentary on the Sermon on the Mount is The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, published in 1937 in Germany. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist. He states in his book, "This distinction between person and office is wholly alien to the teaching of Jesus." He argues you can't separate your person from your office. You always have some kind of office (father, pastor . . .), and you're always a person responsible to Jesus no matter what Uncle Sam says. And what Bonhoeffer writes is so true.

There are great arguments in many directions. And no matter how hard I try to fully explain these commands of Jesus, no matter how much I want to relax them for me and for you, no matter how hard I try to make them reasonable, practical, and understandably applicable to every situation in your life (like instructions to your VCR) . . . I don't think I *can* or *should*.

You say, “Oh *great*. I go to church, and for *what*? To be more confused? To feel more inadequate? To be more . . . poor in spirit? Well, how am I to make the kingdom come and produce the great society?”

You really do wonder, “Why wasn’t Jesus more clear about certain things? Didn’t Jesus think through the results of these statements before He said them? Does Jesus not care about the consequences of these actions? Is He a stupid philanthropist? What does He hope we’ll accomplish? Why is He telling us this stuff?”

Next verse . . . “*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 [in order that, for this reason] you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Henri Nouwen used to tell a story of an old holy man who saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water of the River Ganges. The old man leaned out over the water, hanging to some roots, and tried to rescue the scorpion. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively he withdrew his hand. A few seconds later, having regained his balance, he stretched himself out again. This time the scorpion stung him so badly that his hand became swollen and bloody. The old man’s face contorted with pain.

Just then a passerby saw the old man stretched out over the roots struggling with the scorpion. He yelled, “Hey, stupid, old man! What’s wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature! Don’t you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?” The old man turned to the stranger and said calmly, “My friend, just because it is the scorpion’s nature to sting, that does not change my nature to save.”

God is three persons and one substance. God is love. It is His nature, no matter how much it hurts.

In the beginning God said, “Let us make man in our image and likeness.” Jesus teaches to *always love*. Why? To make a great society? To evangelize the world? To protect the innocent? To make a radical, sociological statement? Because of the effect it will have on the youth of Los Angeles? No! To be sons of your Father . . . like your Father. He *is* your Father, and you are being made in His image.

“He makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good.” He also makes his *Son—S-o-n—* to rise on the evil and the good. Jesus is the “light that enlightens all men,” and He is risen. All will see Him. But that doesn’t mean all men respond to the same light the same way.

Speaking of His crucifixion Jesus says, “Now is the judgment of this world.” The painful, sacrificial love of God in Christ is the judgment [“krisis” in Greek] of the world. Jesus is the *crisis* of the world. To those who refuse Him, He tastes like consuming fire and is. To those who receive Him, He tastes like the finest wine. But He is one substance, the love of God poured out.

“Father sends His rain on the just and the unjust,” said Jesus. Perhaps one field produces fruit and one field produces thorns. But His rain, His fire, and His love is the same. God is one.

Jesus tells us, “Love like your Father.” But, you see, you don’t control the just and the unjust, the good and the evil, the fruit and the thorns. You don’t control the harvest, the results, the future, or the great society.

Jesus does not command you to be successful. He never commands you to manufacture results. But He commands you to *love . . . now*. In the image of God (sons of your Father), He is *the* Son of your Father, the perfect image of the invisible God.

Matthew 26: Angry Jews in the court of the High Priest strike Jesus on the cheek with the palms of their hands and mock him.

Matthew 27: Having beaten Him, Romans strip Jesus of cloak and tunic. They sue (cast lots) for His tunic, and He gives us His cloak. He is crucified naked before Heaven and Hell.

The Roman soldiers made Him carry the cross, but He carried the burden more than a mile: He bore it to Hell.

Jesus fulfilled the law, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” for “He has born our griefs and carried our iniquity. And the Lord has laid on Him the chastisement of us all.” He satisfies His own justice for us evil beggars—His enemies. We sued for His tunic, and He gave us His cloak—His rightful robe—His righteousness.

You are to love like Him. You must trust Him to love like Him. When you're "poor in spirit," He blesses you . . . puts His righteousness on you and begins to live His love through you.

If you say, "I don't look a thing like Jesus," maybe you don't trust His love very much. Maybe you're not very "poor in spirit." Maybe He's making you "poor in spirit" right now, no matter who you are and what you do.

Tax collectors and soldiers came to Jesus and said, "What shall we do?" He didn't tell them to quit, but to do what they did differently. It's almost like all the stuff we worry about isn't the *real issue*. But at all times in all places, love is the issue. Sacrificial, painful love is what makes us different. Abide in Him . . . tax collectors, soldiers, even pastors.

He says, "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect": a perfect image. And Jesus is the perfect image, perfect man. Perfect in the Greek means "flawless" and also "finished," "completed." We have been completed in God's image . . . not when we answer all the questions and understand all things, but when we love like Jesus. From His cross He cried, "It is finished"—perfected. Then He died.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arguably the most brilliant young theologian of the 20th century. But his theology was in direct opposition to the policies of the 3rd Reich. As the Nazi threat grew, scholars in America arranged for his exile to the states and a teaching post in New York. No sooner had the boat docked in July of 1939 than Bonhoeffer knew he must return to Germany and suffer with his fellow believers.

Back in Germany and seeking to love like Christ, he was unable to maintain his pacifist convictions and became involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. In April of 1943, he was arrested for

assisting a group of Jews in an attempt to escape to Switzerland. In July of 1944, the hidden bomb meant for Hitler exploded, but Hitler was out of the room. Bonhoeffer was implicated in the plot and sentenced to death.

Bonhoeffer failed as a pacifist, and he failed as a militant. However, in prison he loved his captors. The guards smuggled his papers to the outside world. (They're now a published classic.) They would apologize to him at night for locking his door. He pastored congregations of men wherever he was imprisoned.

On April 8, 1945, having just finished a prayer, the prison worship service was interrupted. Two men entered and said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." Bonhoeffer whispered to a friend, "This is the end. But for me, it is the beginning of life." The next day he was hanged in Flossenbug (hours before the allies arrived). It's said that as he approached the gallows, he broke free from the guards and ran to the tree on which he'd hang, shouting, "Oh death! You are the supreme festival on the road to Christian freedom! Jesus, I'm coming home."

Bonhoeffer failed as a pacifist and failed as a militant. But he *did not fail* as a disciple of Jesus. I believe he is completed.

So if you say, "What good did it do? What did it accomplish?"

Perhaps sacrificial love is not good for what it produces.

Perhaps everything *else* is good for producing sacrificial love.

Perhaps this entire creation is like a crucible for trying gold, a furnace for manufacturing treasure. And that treasure is "sacrificial love," that is, sons and daughters

in the image of their Father God. For perhaps God Himself is what we would call a stupid philanthropist. He gives Himself away for no other reason than because it is His nature and absolute pleasure . . . like a great artist who can't stop painting even if it kills him. And we are His masterpiece painted in his own blood: His self-portrait.

God isn't making servants that He needs, but Sons that He loves. You know, parents are kind of stupid philanthropists. It *hurts* to give birth, and it hurts to raise them. You know, artists are kind of stupid philanthropists. They create out of fullness; it's not necessity.

If necessity is the mother of invention,
love is the father and mother of art, life, and creation.

At the end of his life, Renoir's arthritis was so bad they had to tape his paintbrush to his hand. He was wealthy and didn't need to paint. They said, "This is crazy! Stupid! Why do this?" He said, "Pain lasts a moment, but beauty lasts a lifetime."

Paul wrote, "These slight, momentary afflictions prepare us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" . . . God's affliction and *our* affliction; God's glory and our glory. So when they slap you on the cheek, say, "Thanks! Could I have another? I'm being prepared for glory and life." Jesus said, "I am the life." If it's to be "survival of the fittest," Jesus is most fit.

Let me remind you, the "will to power" doesn't explain life; it explains death. Sacrificial love explains life: One molecule surrenders to another molecule; one cell sacrifices for a body; one member suffers for the whole.

God is building a body. We are the members. “All the promises of God, law and prophets, are fulfilled in Christ.” God is building the great society. The New Jerusalem isn’t made by us, but the New Jerusalem is made *of* us.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for of them,” Jesus said, “is the kingdom of God.” “We are his masterpiece created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we might walk in them.”

So on the night that Jesus was betrayed, having given thanks He took bread and broke it saying, “This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way after the supper, He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me.”

We invite you to come to the table, tear off a piece of the bread, and dip it in the cup. If you don’t want Jesus, don’t come. If you say, “God, I need a savior! More than a savior, I want you to live your life in me and make me like yourself,” then come to this table. For “apart from Him, you can do nothing.”

“You reign. You have taken up your great power and begun to reign. And we know who sits on the very throne of God. We know who it is who sits on the mercy seat in the inner sanctuary. It is the Lamb that was slain, who comes to dwell in His people and live out His life in this fallen world.

“Lord God, I have to confess to you that I complained about you to my wife this week. I said, ‘Honey, He always has me preach on these verses just when we’re ready to go to war.’

God, I have to confess to you, I don't *know* what you want us to do. I don't *know* what you want George Bush to do.

“So, Lord God, as people poor in spirit we pray to you to *help* him. As people poor in spirit we say, *help* those men and women in the military, Lord. As people poor in spirit, Lord, we say, help the pacifists who don't want the war. As people poor in spirit we say, God bless the children of Ishmael. Lord God, let them see that you are not a God only of wrath, but your wrath is a function of your relentless love.

“Oh Lord God, we pray that you would bless your people of the flesh, the nation of Israel. Lord God, I pray that you will help them to see that you were talking about much more than just a piece of land at the end of the Mediterranean . . .

. . . that, Lord God, when you had them build that temple, you were talking about much more than a bunch of stones . . .

. . . that, Lord God, as you called them and predestined them, you were talking about much more than just a few, short years in this world . . .

. . . that, Lord God, when you had them slay that lamb every morning, you were telling them a love story that is deeper than all space and time. Help them to believe.

“Now, Lord God, we pray for your Israel, what either James or Peter called the Israel of God, the New Jerusalem, your Church. For they are not in one place, but they are the salt of the earth.

“Lord, we pray for your Church in the military, that they would not simply fight with guns and tanks, but they would realize they have a shield of faith and a sword, which is your very

Word. And there is a fire that burns in them that is your Holy Spirit. Lord God, whatever they do, we pray that you would help them to do it with a love for you. And bless them.

“Lord God, we pray for that part of your Church that stands in other places and opposes war. Whatever they do, may they do it out of love for you and not self-righteousness. We bless them.

“Lord God, we pray for your Church—your holy Israel—that lives in the nations of the ancestors of Ishmael. Lord God, they are persecuted and they are tortured . . . they’ve been hit on the cheeks so many times. May they have strength to bear witness to you, Lord Jesus.

“And we pray for your Church in ancestral Israel. Help them to sing your song, Lord God.

“We pray for us, that we would look like you. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Further Reading

When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die. . . . The right way to requite evil, according to Jesus, is not to resist it. This saying of Christ removes the Church from the sphere of politics and law. The Church is not to be a national community like the old Israel, but a community of believers without political or national ties. The old Israel had been both—the chosen people of God *and* a national community, and it was therefore His will that they should meet force with force. But with the Church it is different: it has abandoned political and national status, and therefore it must patiently endure aggression.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.

Romans 12:19-13:4

I feign that devils can, in a spiritual sense, eat one another; and us. Even in human life we have seen the passion to dominate, almost to digest, one’s fellow; to make his whole intellectual and emotional life merely an extension of one’s own—to hate one’s hatreds and resent one’s grievances and indulge one’s egoism through him as well as through oneself. His own little store of passion must of course be suppressed to make room for ours. If he resists this suppression he is being very selfish.

On Earth this desire is often called “love.” In Hell I feign that they recognise it as hunger. But there the hunger is more ravenous, and a fuller satisfaction is possible. There, I suggest, the stronger spirit—there are perhaps no bodies to impede the operation—can really and irrevocably suck the weaker into itself and permanently gorge its own being on the weaker’s outraged individuality. It is (I feign) for this that devils desire human souls and the souls of one another. It is for this that Satan desires all his own

followers and all the sons of Eve and all the host of Heaven. His dream is of the day when all shall be inside him and all that says "I" can say it only through him. This, I surmise, is the bloated-spider parody, the only imitation he can understand, of that unfathomed bounty whereby God turns tools into servants and servants into sons, so that they may be at last reunited to Him in the perfect freedom of a love offered from the height of the utter individualities which he has liberated them to be.

C. S. Lewis

I understood that we are now, as our Lord intends it, dying with him on his cross in our pain and our passion; and if we willingly remain on the same cross with his help and his grace until the final moment, the countenance he turns on us will suddenly change, and we shall be with him in heaven. There will be no time between one moment and the next, and everything will be turned to joy; and this is what he meant in this showing: 'Where is there now one jot of your pain or your sorrow?' And we shall be entirely blessed.

And here I truly saw that if he showed us his blessed countenance now, there is no pain on earth, nor in any other place, that could hurt us, but everything would cause us joy and bliss. But because he shows us a time of suffering, like the suffering he bore in this life and on his cross, we are in distress and suffer with him the hardships which belong to our frailty. And the reason why he suffers is that of his goodness he wants to raise us higher with him in his bliss, and in return for the little pain we suffer here on earth we shall have an exalted, endless knowledge of God, which we could never have without that. And the worse the pain we have suffered with him on his cross, the greater the glory we shall enjoy with him in his kingdom.

Then our good Lord Jesus Christ spoke, asking, 'Are you well pleased that I suffered for you?' I said, 'Yes, my good Lord, thank you. Yes, my good Lord, blessed may you be!' Then Jesus, our kind Lord, said, 'If you are pleased, I am pleased. It is a joy, a delight and an endless happiness to me that I ever endured suffering for you, and if I could suffer more, I would suffer more.'

Julian of Norwich

To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things. . . . So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all

comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

I Corinthians 4:11-13, II Corinthians 4:16-18

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Lookout Mountain Community Church
534 Commons Drive, Golden CO 80401
Phone: 303-526-9287 Fax: 303-526-9361
E-mail: info@lomcc.org