

“Love Without Limits” (Matthew 5:38–48)

Last month, my neighbor and workout partner turned a stunningly youthful forty. His generous wife bought him a thousand dollar mini-gym. Ted and I were beside ourselves! We were finally going to lift weights as God originally intended. There was only one problem: The three flat boxes that were delivered looked nothing like the gym we were expecting. We needed to put this weight-lifting paradise together ourselves. (I hate it when there is no demo model!) We read on-line that the estimated time to put everything together was eight hours! I about cried when I read this! To make matters more excruciating, the directions were dreadful! Whoever wrote these directions is either a rocket scientist from MIT with a chip on his shoulder, or an utter imbecile with a sadistic sense of humor. Unlike me, Ted is very mechanically inclined. Yet, even Ted said, “I have never put together anything more difficult than the Marcy 4300.” In time, we assembled the beast. Or, should I say, Ted finally subdued this project. I just handed him tools and tried not to make too many blunders. In the end, the only way we completed this task was by following the directions. Even though the directions were confusing, difficult, and disputable, without them we would have been sunk. Therefore, we poured over every page, photograph, diagram, and step-by-step direction, gleaning what help each could offer.

Likewise, in the spiritual realm, the only way to deal with an especially daunting task or relationship is by studying the directions in God’s Word. This admonition is especially important when it comes to loving those who hurt us. We live in a society of raw power: the one with the strongest fists or the most guns wins. Instead of the Golden Rule, our ethics are, “Do unto others first, before they do unto you.” “If they do anything bad to you at all, finish them off before they can do anything worse.” Or my personal favorite, “I don’t get mad, I get even.” All of these expressions are natural responses; however, you and I are called to live a supernatural life. In Matthew 5:38–48 Jesus says, “*When you love without limits, you are like God.*” In these eleven verses, He lays down two discipleship commitments.

1. Forgo your own “rights” (5:38–42). Contrary to popular belief, you have no rights. When you became a disciple, you signed up to die to self.¹ In 5:38 Jesus says, “**You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’**” Jesus quotes the law of retaliation that is found in three Old Testament passages (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21).² This phrase causes some to say that the Old Testament Law was savage and bloodthirsty, but that is not true. Actually, it was the beginning of mercy. And it is the foundational law of all civilization. Although it allows retaliation, it limited retaliation by setting restrictions. The law was intended as an equalizer of justice.³ If a person knocks out my tooth, I get his. And if I poke out his eye, he gets mine. Retaliation as we know it sets out to get more than that. We want to up the ante. We want two eyes for an eye or a life for an eye.⁴ But this law limited retaliation and disproportionate revenge. In other words, people could only get back what they lost. In addition to being merciful, the law limited retaliation for the offended. It didn’t allow the whole family to get into the act. When wronged, we tend to line up forces of family and friends to retaliate. If a person cuts off my ear, I want to cut off his head. And if I cut off his head, his brother will kill me, and if he kills me, my brother will kill his brother, and pretty soon we have a clan war. Without the law of retaliation, revenge goes from the individual to the family to the clan to the tribe and ultimately to whole nations. So what seems like a blood-hungry law was actually a way of limiting violence and bloodshed.⁵ Furthermore, while the law allows one to get even within limits, it does not *require* one to get even.⁶ So even in the Old Testament one could forgo retaliation.

Of course, Jesus’ teaching generally goes above and beyond the Law. In 5:39a Jesus declares, “**But I say to you, do not resist [retaliate against]⁷ an evil person...**” The word translated “resist” in this context means “do not render evil for evil.”⁸ Jesus is talking about revenge, not self-preservation. He isn’t telling us to be weak and passive; He’s telling us not to be vindictive. Jesus wants us to ask the question, “If someone does something evil to me, how may I respond with only good in return?”⁹ Obviously, this is a high standard to live up to! Yet, Jesus style-discipleship is not for spiritual wimps!

In 5:39b–42, Jesus provides four illustrations of what it means to not retaliate against an evil person.¹⁰ In His first illustration in 5:39b Jesus says, **“but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”** This verse is often used to prohibit any form of self-defense. But is this Jesus’ intent? First of all, notice that Jesus specifically mentions “the right cheek.” Approximately 90% of the people in the world are right-handed. [Bring a young man on stage and provide the following slow-motion visual demonstration.] I am right-handed and if I punch you with my right hand, I will hit you on the left cheek. If I try to hit you on the right cheek with my right fist, I won’t hurt you one bit. Jesus is not referring to a situation where another person is attempting to punch your lights out. He is speaking of a slap across the right cheek with the back of the right hand. Second, in Jesus’ day a slap to one’s face was considered a gross insult by the Jews, and was among the most demeaning acts one could inflict on another person. Slapping someone on the cheek was a sign of contempt and did not pose a serious safety threat.¹¹ It was considered a terrible insult.¹² Receiving the back of the hand meant that you were scorned as inconsequential—a nothing.¹³ If a man struck you with the back of his hand instead of punching you in the mouth, you could collect twice the damages because an insult was worse than an injury in Jesus’ honor-shame society.¹⁴ Even today, the Irish often say, “The back of my hand to you,” which means, “You are scum.”¹⁵ Third, Jesus is not describing a physical attack and telling us to roll over and “play dead.” You should not encourage your children to be beat up by bullies. Nor should you stand by and watch while an innocent person is attacked. You should not let thieves, murderers, and terrorists have their way in our society. When necessary, you should seek to protect yourself, your family members, and victims of injustice and cruelty. But what Jesus is saying is this: When someone insults you, do not seek revenge.¹⁶ You should not trade insults, even if it means you receive more.¹⁷ You must avoid retaliation and personal revenge!¹⁸ *When you love without limits, you are like God.*

A couple of years ago when Tiger Woods won the Master’s Tournament, Fuzzy Zoeller responded with some mean, racist remarks—remarks he intended to be funny, but were only mean-spirited. Fuzzy received a great deal of well-deserved criticism for his comments, but Tiger Woods’ response was, “We all make mistakes and it’s time to move on.” Tiger could have returned the insult—the media would have loved it—but he refused to retaliate. Instead, he said, “Let’s move on.”

Do you share Tiger Woods’ response? Is this your attitude when you bear the brunt of insults? Can you say, “We all make mistakes and it’s time to move on?” Jesus did not give tit for tat. He was not in the business of getting even. Some of us would even the score, even if it kills us—and it may! By nature we are vindictive. Vindictiveness will eat our heart out. It will sour our spirit. How unlike the Savior we are. As soon as someone starts a rumor about us, we get on our high horse. Our backs arch like a cat. We show our fangs. We are ready to do battle. If given a chance, we will hang their hide on the wall. We are still in kindergarten spiritually, compared to our Lord. We believe that we must defend ourselves and vindicate ourselves. When it came to this kind of thing, our Lord Jesus was not concerned about His reputation. Are you willing to leave retaliation in God’s hands? This is not to imply that you are to be passive in your relationships. Jesus often confronted those around Him, but He was not vindictive. Jesus did not threaten His accusers with harm. He did not say, “I’ll get even. I’ll get the Father after you.”

In Jesus’ second illustration in 5:40 He says: **“If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.”**¹⁹ This is where we get the expression, “I lost my shirt.” The Greek word translated “shirt” (*chiton*) is translated “tunic” in many English versions.²⁰ The term refers to a long-sleeved inner robe similar to a nightshirt that a person wore next to the skin.²¹ Jesus instructs His disciples that if someone tries to sue for their tunic, they should let him have their “coat” (*himation*) as well. This cloak was the outer robe (cf. 27:35), which was an indispensable piece of clothing that the poor used for a sleeping cover.²² It was possible in Jesus’ day to sue others for the very shirt on their backs. However, no one could take another’s cloak. So even if you lost your shirt (or tunic) in court, and your opponent asked for your cloak and won it, he had to return it every evening for you to sleep in. That was the law.

What was the situation here? Evidently, Jesus was giving advice to the poor among His followers—those who had been reduced to the garments on their backs because of persecution for their faith. His teaching is simply this: “As they sue you (no doubt falsely) for your shirt and win it, give them your cloak too, even though they cannot legally take it.” Jesus makes a startling demand of His disciples. They must reverse the dynamic. Instead of defending themselves or seeking retaliation, they must give to this person who is so unfairly attempting to take their most basic necessities.²³ This is supremely radical, and it is meant to point one’s persecutors to Christ.²⁴ *When you love without limits, you are like God.*

In Jesus’ third illustration in 5:41 He says: **“Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.”** This verse provides the background for the expression, “Go the second mile.” In Jesus’ day, Roman soldiers had the authority to force civilians to carry their loads for one mile. However, Roman law said that a person only had to do this service for one mile and then he was free to go. Obviously, the Jews held to the letter of the law on this. They measured the mile in steps: one thousand exactly. And they counted every single step. When they got to one thousand they stopped, put down the pack, and left the Roman to carry his own load or find another victim.²⁵ The Jews hated the Romans making them carry their loads. I can just see some slave saying, “Fine. I may have to carry this soldier’s stuff, but you never know what might happen to it. It could get really dirty if I accidentally drop it in the mud. You just never know.” Jesus’ point is: “Don’t behave like this! Instead, offer to go another mile. Give your opponent more than he has the right to demand.²⁶ Ask him, ‘Is there anything else I can do to help you?’” You should demonstrate a humble servant’s heart and cheerfully go beyond what is expected or demanded.²⁷ When your boss gives you a dreadful project that is too much to bear, seek to serve him or her. If your boss treats you poorly, honor him or her and find out how you can go the extra mile. Seek to be a blessing. *When you love without limits, you are like God.*

In Jesus’ fourth and final illustration in 5:42 He says: **“Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.”** This illustration has to do with the law of lending.²⁸ Deut 15:7–11 indicates that debts were canceled every seven years. The borrowers loved this. The lenders were not quite so enthusiastic. If I was a lender and someone came to me for a loan in the sixth year, I would think twice before giving it to him. If he didn’t pay it off quickly, my loan would turn into a gift. The closer the seventh year got, the more tightfisted businessmen became. But Jesus said they were not to allow the seventh year to govern them. Whenever a person had a need, God’s people were to give generously. After all, the people in Jesus’ day were not asking for home-improvement loans. They needed money for food. In our day and age, does this mean that a Christian banker should never refuse a loan application, no matter how bad a person’s credit report looks? Does this mean you have to loan money to irresponsible people again and again, even if you know they won’t make an effort to pay it back? Or that every time you’re approached by someone on the street that you have to give them your money? No, because this commandment doesn’t relieve you of your obligation to manage your resources responsibly. It’s your responsibility to practice generosity, but it’s also your responsibility to practice discernment. Jesus is talking about people in legitimate need.

Do you like paying taxes? If you’re like most Americans, you probably resent it, right? Maybe you wish you could find some way to make sure the government doesn’t get a dime. I wonder if Jesus would suggest that in addition to paying your taxes with gladness that you also pay the second dollar. Perhaps Jesus is asking you to sacrifice an even more costly commodity—your time. The government supports all kinds of social programs that feed, house, and educate the poor. You could resent having to pay for these services or you could say, “You know, I can do better than that. I can volunteer for programs that provide jobs for those who need work, shelters for those who need housing, food for the hungry, and community health services for those who are diseased.²⁹ I can build a house or teach someone to read. I can support an organization that provides baby supplies for unwed mothers.”³⁰ *When you love without limits, you are like God.*

[The first commitment you must make is to forgo your own rights. This is necessary because as a disciple you have no “rights.” If you are to live like Jesus, you must go above and beyond the Law. The second commitment you must make is to...]

2. Kill your enemies with kindness (5:43–48). Obviously, I am speaking figuratively here. The primary way you demonstrate that you are Christ’s disciple is by your love for others,³¹ particularly your enemies. In 5:43 Jesus says, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’”** The phrase, “You shall love your neighbor” is a quote from Lev 19:18. The word “neighbor” conveys the idea of one who is near. The neighbor could be a fellow believer or an adversary. The phrase “hate your enemy” is not a direct quote from any Old Testament passage; it was an inference from various texts (Deut 23:3–6; 25:17–19; Ps 139:21).³² The crowd that was listening to Jesus’ sermon must have said, “Okay, I will love my next-door neighbor, but those blasphemous Samaritans and unclean Gentiles—well, that’s another matter.”³³ However, in 5:44, Jesus once again goes above and beyond the Law by declaring: **“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**³⁴ Here, love is not simply praised, it is commanded.³⁵ This requires supernatural strength. It has been said, “To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine.”³⁶ Now if you have been raped or molested, you don’t have to be friends with your enemy. In cases like this that would be unhealthy and dangerous. But you are still commanded to love your enemy. However, Jesus does not say that you need to *like* your enemy or like what he does. Rather, you are called to love him or her. Biblical *agape* love requires that you are concerned about the welfare of even your enemies. This means that you will do things that will benefit and not harm them. How do you know if you really love your enemy? Do you pray for him or her?³⁷ You can be confident that you love your enemy when you pray for him or her. Has it ever dawned on you that your greatest enemy and persecutor may be your spouse, your child, your sibling, or your parent?

Why should you love your enemies? Jesus gives the purpose in loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you in 5:45: **“so that³⁸ you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”**³⁹ You may be saying, “Wait a second, I thought I already was a son or daughter of God.” If you have believed in Christ as your Savior, you are a son or daughter of God. The focus of this verse is not on attaining a relationship with God, but rather on being a person who shares the characteristics of God. That is the meaning of the Semitic idiom “son of.” We would say, “Like father, like son.”⁴⁰ We say of a son, “He’s a chip off the old block.” Of a daughter we say, “She’s the spittin’ image of her mother.”⁴¹ When you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, you are like God who is so gracious that He gives good things even to those who rebel against Him. Jesus says that His Father sends sunshine and rain to fall on believers and blasphemers. God deals with enemies and friends alike. When you deal with both enemies and friends with their highest good in mind, you are like God.⁴²

In 5:46–47, Jesus poses two pairs of rhetorical questions that get to the heart of the matter. He says, **“For if you love those who love you, what reward⁴³ do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet [bless]⁴⁴ only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”** Jesus declares that friendship with one’s friends is nothing exceptional. Everyone does that...even tax collectors. In Jesus’ day, the tax collectors would collect taxes for the Roman government and then add a surcharge, which they kept. Since tax collectors worked for Rome, they were viewed as traitors to their own people and were not well liked. (Around April 15th many Americans are not too fond of tax collectors either.) Tax collectors were the most despised people in Jewish society, yet even they had love for those who loved them. Jesus’ point is, this is true of everyone. So how is your love going to surpass that of the tax collector? Is there something about your love that cannot be explained in natural terms? Is there something special and unique about your love that is not present in the life of the unbeliever? These are important questions because your love must be supernatural. Do you stop being kind and gracious to others because you know that they dislike you?

Jesus concludes this passage in 5:48 with the words: **“Therefore you⁴⁵ are to be⁴⁶ perfect,⁴⁷ as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁴⁸** This verse summarizes not only this passage (5:38–48), but everything that has been said thus far in the Sermon on the Mount (5:3–47). Jesus makes it clear that the goal of Christianity is perfection. You are called to be like Jesus, the only one who lived a perfect life. The burden of trying to be perfect is so heavy, someone has observed, “The Christian life has not been tried and found difficult; it has been tried and found impossible.” So how can you deal with this? How can you put together the demands of Scripture with the realities of life? One solution to this tension between holy expectation and unholy performance is to change the standard and make the demands relative. “No one can be perfect, you know, so there must be some sort of sliding scale here. Just do the best you can. Try to one-up your neighbor.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, this thinking can become a reason not to rise to anything better. Yet, Jesus calls you to rise above your imperfect love to His perfect *agape* love.⁵⁰ This can only occur when you trust in His perfect person and work.

You might read 5:48 and wonder, “Could I ever do that?” If so, you’re asking the wrong question. I don’t know if I could ever go into combat. I see the images on television—the firefights, the bravery, the sacrifices, the casualties—and I wonder if I have what it takes. The first and hardest decision, however, is not whether I could jump into a firefight with an AK-47, but whether I could join the military in the first place. If I reach the point where I feel called to enter the military and I sign the papers, then at that point I’ve already decided that I am willing to go into battle. Answering “yes” to the first question, “Can I serve in the military?” automatically answers the second, “Can I go into combat?”

The demands of the Sermon on the Mount work the same way. When you look at the requirements, you rightfully ask, “Could I really do that?” But that’s the wrong question to *focus* on. The first and most important question is: “Can I answer Jesus’ call to discipleship?” If you answer that affirmatively, you automatically answer the question, “Can I carry out Jesus’ discipleship demands?” As a disciple, because you’ve already decided up front that you’ll obey Jesus’ commands, the question now is not will you live the life, but how?⁵¹ *When you love without limits, you are like God.*

Perhaps you’ve seen the movie on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.⁵² Gandhi studied Christianity in England but never became a Christian because he claimed Christianity didn’t seem to work for Christians. Although he wasn’t impressed by the Christians he met, he was very impressed with Jesus, especially His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi tried to incorporate Jesus’ wisdom into his own life. At one point in the movie, civil war breaks out between Pakistan and India. The war stems from divisions between the Muslims of Pakistan and the Hindus of India. Gandhi lies on a cot after weeks of fasting in protest to this war. A distraught Hindu man approaches him. His only son, still a little boy, has been shot and killed in the conflict. His heart is full of sadness, bitterness, and revenge. Gandhi can barely speak, but tells the man how to heal his own heart. “Find a little Muslim boy whose father has been killed. Take that boy as your son, and raise him as a Muslim.” The distraught man walks away completely confused and disappointed. Apparently he thought the weeks of fasting had weakened Gandhi’s ability to reason. It made no sense to him whatsoever.

If Gandhi could seek to live out the Sermon on the Mount the way he did, how much more so can you as a believer in Jesus Christ? *When you love without limits, you are like God.*

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Scripture References

Matthew 5:38–48

Deuteronomy 15:7–11

Romans 12:19–21

1 Thessalonians 5:14–15

John 18:22–23

Leviticus 19:18

Matthew 22:34–40

Study Questions

1. In the past, how have I retaliated against those who have hurt me? To whom am I now relating according to an “eye for an eye” (5:38)? How can I begin to be merciful in that relationship as my heavenly Father would be?
2. How do I respond when I am insulted or taken advantage of (5:39b–42)? Have I learned to ignore hurtful words spoken by hurting people? Am I willing to go the extra mile in my work and giving? Can I do so with a godly attitude? Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) said, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?” If I fulfill Jesus’ words in 5:39–42, how will I make friends with those who treat me poorly at home, work, and school?
3. Over the course of my life, how have I tangibly loved my enemies (5:44)? Am I presently seeking to love an enemy? If so, what am I doing to express my love for him or her? Am I currently praying for my enemies? If so, what are my specific prayer requests for these individuals?
4. Is my love for my enemies clearly a supernatural work that can only be attributed to God (5:46–47)? What examples can I cite that confirm this? How can I reach out to my enemies in a way that shows them love? Read Romans 12:17–21.
5. How does Jesus’ standard of perfection make me feel (5:48)? Is it easy to focus on Jesus’ person and work as my sole source of perfection? Why or why not? How can I learn to daily preach the gospel to myself? What difference might this make in my Christian life?

Notes

¹ Matt 16:24–27; Mark 8:34–38; and Luke 9:23–27.

² This is quoted verbatim from the LXX.

³ Most commentators doubt that it was intended to be applied literally in every case, but it was a graphic metaphor to establish equivalence of loss in a given circumstance. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 248.

⁴ David L. Turner, *Matthew*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 174.

⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living* (Grand Rapids: RBC, 1991), 153

⁶ David S. Dockery & David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1992), 62.

⁷ The word *anthistemi* (“resist”) only occurs here in Matthew. In the passive it means “resist”; however, in the active it means “retaliate.” Here, it means to take justice into one’s own hands.

⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary series (Dallas: Word, 1993), 130.

⁹ Thomas Long, *Matthew*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 63.

¹⁰ These four illustrations find a partial parallel in Luke 6:29–30.

¹¹ See John 18:22–23; Acts 23:2–5; and 2 Cor 11:20.

¹² See also Job 16:10 and Lam 3:3. Donald A. Carson, “Matthew.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Electronic ed. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 220.

¹³ This remains true in the Middle East even today.

¹⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*. Preaching the Word Series (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), Electronic ed.

¹⁵ Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, 155.

¹⁶ See Jesus’ example in Isa 50:6. The LXX even uses the term “slapping.”

¹⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*. New American Commentary series (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 113.

¹⁸ See Prov 20:22 and 24:29.

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Cor 6:7 where Paul exhorts the Corinthians to be wronged and defrauded rather than to institute a lawsuit.

²⁰ E.g., NET, ESV, NIV, NKJV.

²¹ The simple clothing of a person in the first century was a loincloth, covered by one or more body-length tunic(s), the outer cloak, a girdle acting as a belt, a head covering, and sandals.

²² Exod 22:26–27; Deut 24:12; Ezek 18:7; Amos 2:8.

²³ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 250.

²⁴ Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

²⁵ Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, 157.

²⁶ Chip Bell, “Sweet Revenge” (Matt 5:38–42; Rom 12:17–21): <http://www.bible.org>

²⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 128.

²⁸ Some hold that Jesus’ words may allude to begging; giving alms was viewed highly in the ancient world (Matt 6:1–4; Deut 15:7–11).

²⁹ Long, *Matthew*, 63–64.

³⁰ Bell, “Sweet Revenge.”

³¹ Jesus to His disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

³² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 114.

³³ Long, *Matthew*, 64.

³⁴ See the example of Stephen in Acts 7:60.

³⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 130.

³⁶ Alfred Plummer, *Matthew* (London: Paternoster, 1910), 89.

³⁷ See also Michael Eaton, *The Way that Leads to Life* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999), 103.

³⁸ The NASB update (1995) altered the confusing NASB (1977) rendering of “in order that.” This gives the impression that there is something that one must *do* to be “a son of your Father.”

³⁹ Matt 5:45 refers to what theologians call “common grace” (i.e., God’s care extends to believer and unbeliever alike).

⁴⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 226.

⁴¹ Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, 165.

⁴² Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, 164.

⁴³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 227.

⁴⁴ When Jesus spoke of greeting someone, He didn't mean a simple "hello." To greet someone in the Middle East is to wish the best to them. Their greeting was all bound up in blessing: Blessing on you, blessing on your children, and blessing on your children's children. Even the pagans did that. In fact their greetings were known for that. They were often long and elaborate. Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, 165. See also Blomberg 115.

⁴⁵ The word "you" (*humeis*) is emphatic. These words are directed specifically to the disciples.

⁴⁶ Matthew's use of the future tense here (lit., "you shall be perfect") has an imperatival thrust, as the NIV indicates.

⁴⁷ Wilkins writes, "The word 'perfect' (*teleios*) is also used in the LXX in Deuteronomy 18:13: 'You shall be perfect before your God.' The word used in the Hebrew text (*tamim*) denotes the idea of wholeness or completeness (Lev. 23:15, 30; Josh. 10:13), specifying the soundness of sacrificial animals (Ex. 12:5) or the complete commitment of a person to God, including ethical blamelessness (Gen. 6:9; 17:1; Deut. 18:13; 2 Sam. 22:24–27). The Greek term *teleios* carries the same connotations: the end, completion, or complete thing, that which is made whole or perfect. But it can also indicate a person who has attained spiritual maturity. But with the Father as the goal, Jesus is not saying, 'Be mature as your heavenly Father is mature.' He is saying, 'Be perfect, like your heavenly Father.' The disciples are to pursue the Father's perfection as the goal of their lives." Wilkins, *Matthew*, 254.

⁴⁸ This remark echoes the more common OT statements like Lev 19:2 or Deut 18:13: "you must be holy as I am holy."

⁴⁹ There are, however, two problems with seeing that meaning in 5:48. First, maturity is not a property of God. The Bible teaches that God is immutable. He never changes. In fact, He cannot change in any way because He is already perfect. Maturity presupposes movement from immaturity, and God was never immature. That's one problem. A second problem is the analogy in the verse: "as your heavenly Father is perfect." If God's perfections are absolute, so ours are supposed to be also. We are not simply to be mature in the same way He is mature, because He isn't mature. He is perfect. We are to be that also. There isn't much wiggle room here. In fact, there is no wiggle room at all. Perfection is the moral standard that God demands. When it comes to applying this, our minds move very quickly to the recognition that we simply aren't that way. Moral perfection is not something that we can attain to. If we are to achieve perfection, it will not be by means of our own efforts. It will be because God gives us the perfection that we lack on our own. In Phil 3:9 Paul said his desire was to "be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith."

⁵⁰ See John 15:13; Rom 5:7–8.

⁵¹ Adapted and revised from Brian Jones, "Discipleship Before Forgiveness," *Non-Religious Devotional Thoughts* (8/6/08).

⁵² The movie is called "Gandhi" (1982) and was written by John Briley and directed by Richard Attenborough.