

## **Be Like God**

*Matthew 5:38-48*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

If I might, I want to start at the last verse. Jesus says: “Be *perfect*, therefore, as your heavenly Father is *perfect*” (Matt. 5:48).

Now, I don’t know how perfectly everything is going in your life, but that seems to be rather tall order to me. “Just be like God. That’s all. I’m not asking too much here. Be perfect, like God, and you’ll be fine.”

Is anyone familiar with the Enneagram?

The Enneagram is a system of personality typing that describes patterns in how people interpret the world and manage their emotions. The Enneagram describes nine personality types and how each relates to others. Those nine types are each associated with a number and a generic title. They are:

1. The Idealist
2. The Helper
3. The Achiever
4. The Individualist
5. The Investigator
6. The Loyalist
7. The Enthusiast
8. The Challenger
9. The Peacemaker

Can you guess which type I am? I am a One — the Idealist, also known as the Perfectionist. My personality is driven by my need to be *perfect*. I *need* to be perfect. In my world, there are no B, C, or D grades. There is only an A or an F. You can give me a B, but I will receive it as if it was an F. Perfection or failure — nothing in-between. That’s how I tend to see everything.

And, because no one is perfect, I sometimes like to take it upon myself to point out to others a few ways that they might improve themselves so that they can become just a little more perfect. Right, Christen? It’s not easy being married to or working with someone who has perfectionist tendencies.

So, if I was one of those hip, young, bearded, skinny-jean wearing pastors, and I had a “life-verse” tattooed on my forearm, it would probably be: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

But the thing is, I’m not so sure that “perfect” is the right word for the translation of this verse. The Greek word that is translated as “perfect,” means to be perfected, or completed, or finished. It means to have all the parts; to have reached full maturity or the desired end.

At the very end of his life while hanging on the cross – suffering, laboring for every breath – Jesus used the same word when he said, “It is *finished*” (John 19:30). He didn’t mean, “This is perfect.” He meant that this was the *completion* of that phase of his ministry.

So, in the context of our passage, this word might better be translated in a sense that conveys our having reached the desired end of our discipleship – something less like, “Be perfect,” and something more like, “Be *mature* as your heavenly Father is *mature*.”

And if Christ’s desired end is for us to be mature, then what he teaches us up to this point may be understood as a sort of road map for coming to full maturity. To show us what he means, Jesus takes as his example the *law of retaliation*, and points out the stages through which it had passed until it came to its culmination – its fullest maturity.

Here’s what I mean: “An eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth,” may sound absolutely barbaric to us today, but that command from the book of Exodus actually set limitations on retaliation. Before those limitations were set, things could often get out of hand.

The first, earliest, and most immature expression of the law of retaliation is the law of *unlimited retaliation*. In this stage, if someone knocked out one of your eyes, you were justified to knock out both of theirs. If someone knocked out one of your teeth, you were justified to knock *all* of theirs.

There was no limit on retaliation, and with no limits in place, escalation was a natural response. The philosophy would go something like this: If I killed your cat, you might kill my dog. Because you killed my dog, I might kill your cow. Because I killed your cow, you might kill my mule. Because you killed my mule, I might kill you.

You see what I mean? Without limitations, the tendency of retaliation was to escalate exponentially. It was the law of the jungle. Every person for him or herself. Kill or be killed. Might makes right. If you had the power to retaliate you could.

When I try to think of a good example of this stage of retaliation, I can’t help but think of Wile E. Coyote trying to get that pesky Road Runner – each attempt escalating until the end of the cartoon, in his final attempt he blows himself up.

I love westerns, but I bet there isn’t a single western television show or movie today that isn’t operating on the principle of unlimited retaliation. My current guilty pleasure is the show modern day western starring Kevin Costner called “Yellowstone.” If you’ve watched even a single episode, then you know that if you mess with the Dutton family or threaten their ranch, and you will learn the definition of unlimited retaliation. There’s hardly a single redeeming character in the whole show, because all of them abide under the “kill or be killed” mantra.

And before you say, “Well those are just cartoons and movies. They aren’t real. People don’t really act that way,” I want remind you of the real life, historic feud between the

Hatfields and the McCoys — real families that nearly wiped each other off of the face of the planet in their never ending escalation of vengeance. And that is the ultimate end result of the law of unlimited retaliation — everyone ends up dead.

Civilization cannot exist under a system where there are no limitations on retaliation. You can't stay the wild west forever. So nearly every ancient civilization began developing laws that put limitations on retaliation.

For the Jewish people, the law of *limited retaliation* is clearly expressed in the book of Exodus, which reads: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (21:23-25).

In other words, you were to limit your retaliation to the exact amount of the injury. Get even, but no more. We might even venture to call this "justice." If you take my eye, and I take yours, the scales of justice balance out. If you kill my mule, and I, in turn, kill yours, the scales of justice balance out.

This, of course, was a far sight better than before, but Jesus says, "It's not good enough."

"You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matt. 5:28-42).

In essence, he says, "It's not enough to limit yourself to only taking what was taken from you. Rather, you must never respond with evil at all." Someone smacks you, don't smack them back (even though that's fair). Instead, turn the other cheek and let them smack that one, too. Someone wants to sue the shirt off your back, let them have your undershirt, too.

The point that Jesus was trying to make was that even as much of an improvement as limited retaliation was over unlimited retaliation, it still wasn't enough. Children of God had to do better. They had to respond differently. It couldn't just be *quid pro quo* for us. We had to be willing to give up on the idea of retaliation all together.

Do you know how challenging that really is? We rarely do it. I mean, have you ever actually seen someone turn the other cheek? I can count the number of times I have on one finger.

But maybe the first step in maturing out of a retaliatory mindset is simply to choose not to retaliate at all, even when it's deserved, even when it's what I really want to do.

The third stage is the stage of *limited love*.

This stage was also written into the Jewish law. Leviticus 19:18 says this: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of *your* people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s one thing, isn’t it, to take vengeance or hold a grudge against somebody you don’t know. Say, some dumb-dumb is texting while driving and runs into the back of your car at a stoplight, and you don’t know this guy from Adam? Yeah, I’m going to call the cops and get a full report done. I may even try to press charges for negligent driving. That’s a Class II misdemeanor in Colorado. That will teach that him to text while driving!

But what if the dumb-dumb who ran into the back of you by sheer coincidence was one of your good friends? What if it was Pastor Dan? What would you do then? Would you still press charges if it was someone you knew and cared about?

How we treat *our* people is usually markedly different than how we treat *other* people. We don’t seek vengeance against *our* people. We don’t hold grudges against *our* people. We *love* our people.

This is the stage out of which most of us operate most of the time — *and* it’s most clearly reflected in our practices and beliefs around marriage.

Here’s what I mean: this isn’t *Game of Thrones*. We do not live in a feudal society where empires are built or fall based on who’s child marries whom. We are not seeking to “unite the houses,” so to speak. We aren’t trying bring our enemies under the banner of house Targaryen by making our children marry our enemy’s children.

By and large, we do not marry for political gain. We marry for love. And, generally, we fall in love with someone who is more like us than they are *unlike* us. We fall in love with someone who shares our interests, our values, our goals in life.

And how we operate in marriage is how we tend to operate in all aspects of our lives. Our friends, where we live, where we worship: we gravitate toward those people who are already like us, because it’s easier to love people who are already like us — who think like us, believe like us, look like us, behave like us, share the same interests as us.

The law of limited love is what most of us do most of the time.

But, dad-gummit, if Jesus doesn’t look at the law of limited love and say, “This is good, but it’s not near good enough...”

“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 you may be children of your Father in heaven...” (Matt. 5:43-45).

Jesus says that the law of limited love is fine, but that the ultimate fulfillment of the law — its final goal — is the law of *unlimited love*.

He says that *if* you really want to be considered children of our Father in heaven, then love must be the basis of *all* your relationships; not just the basis of your relationships with your neighbors and your friends and your fellow church members and your family and your spouse — but even the basis of your relationships with your *enemies*.

Why? Because that is precisely how our God relates to each and every person — on the basis of unlimited love. “He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” says Jesus. (Matt. 5:45).

The theologian Martin Neimoller said it like this: “It took me a long time to realize not only did God not hate my enemies, God didn’t even hate *his* enemies.”

Did I ever tell you about my high school arch-nemesis?

His name was Brandon. Brandon was the worst. Everything about him annoyed me — his stupid haircut. That dumb smirk he always had on his face. He was always trying to beatbox to impress girls. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but there is not a huge beatboxing scene in Wyoming. He always bought his clothes at the Gap. So, I refused, out of principle, to wear anything from the Gap because of him.

Every sport, every play, every class that I went out for or signed up for, he did too. If I went out for basketball, so did he. If I liked a girl, he liked the same one. If I tried out for a part in a play, he wouldn’t just audition for the same play. He’d audition for the same part. It was so annoying. And it was even worse on the occasions when he got the part in the play that I wanted or got a date with the girl that I liked.

But that wasn’t even the worst part. The worst part was that all of my friends loved him. They thought Brandon was so great. So I couldn’t even go to a friend’s house to watch movies without him being there. I could never get away from the guy.

I probably haven’t even seen Brandon in 15 or more years, but I still cannot talk about him without it making my blood boil.

But Jesus says not only should I love him, I should pray for him, too... And I don’t think he means that I should pray for Brandon to suffer premature baldness.

Life would be easier, wouldn’t it, if God would just let us live under the law of *limited love*? We could spend all our time only with people we liked and to heck with the rest of them. We could set all kinds of great rules for church membership, too, couldn’t we?

1. Must be a Denver Broncos fan — this is Broncos country and we take it seriously.
2. Must prefer mountains over oceans; we believe God’s beauty is better revealed by any of Colorado’s 56 “fourteeners” than by the vastness of an ocean.
3. (This one might be a little controversial at first, but just hang with me. I’m sure you’ll grow to appreciate it as much as I do.) Must prefer dogs over cats; we believe that cats are the spawn of satan.

But Jesus just won't let us do that, will he?

He says, "If you love only those who love you, how does that make you any different than anyone else in this world? Even your enemies – even Brandon – does that."

If we are going to reach maturity as children of God, we have to love like our Father loves. And our God's love does not discriminate. Our God's love knows no national or political boundaries. Our God's love extends even to his enemies, even to Packer fans, even to cat lovers, even to Brandon.

There are no limitations on God's kind of love, and we will only reach God-like maturity when we choose to love like God loves.

In another place in scripture, we read:

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. Love – God's kind of love – bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Let it be so, God. And let it begin with me.

Amen.