

SERMON TITLE: "A Good Word Strives for Perfect Love"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 5:38-48  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: August 27, 2017, at First UMC

## **INTRODUCTION**

[\(Use 1-minute "Advice from Children: Embrace Love" Video\)](#)

*Caucasian boy: There's a lot of violence in the world right now.*

*African American boy: I just see people shooting and car wrecks that sometimes were done on purpose.*

*Off-screen adult male: What do you think the power of God could do in our world?*

*African American boy: Change some of the people's minds and how they act.*

*Caucasian girl 1: We need to love our neighbors and love our enemies.*

*Caucasian boy: We've been talking about Martin Luther King, Jr., and he inspired me to stand up for other people and to stand up for peace.*

*African American boy: You should be kind, like, always.*

*Caucasian boy: If we try and work together and make everyone's rights equal, then maybe life will be fair.*

*Caucasian girl 2: What would a Christian be without love, and what would you do with that love? I think you should share it with others.*

*African American boy: Make peace in the world and love each other. That's what I think.*

*Ending caption: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. –Romans 12:21<sup>1</sup>*

All through this month of August, we've been exploring Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter 5. We've been looking to Jesus' famous speech for wisdom about what a good word is and does. So far, we've heard that a good word begins with a blessing, a good word glorifies God, and a good word avoids anger, insults, and oaths. Each week, Jesus' expectations of a good word have gotten a little harder, and, after church last Sunday, some of you told me that you were feeling it. But Jesus isn't done with us yet. In today's verses, Jesus challenges us even more. So, I invite you to consider how a good word strives for perfect love.

## **1—BY RESPONDING PEACEFULLY**

In Matthew 5:38-42, we see first of all that a good word strives for perfect love by responding peacefully. Jesus said, "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 anyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

Wow! Are we supposed to just let evil run rampant, plowing us and everyone else down like a terrorist car into a crowd? Surely that’s not what Jesus meant, right? There’s definitely a nuance here that we must sort out. Obviously a good word that strives for perfect love is spoken somewhere between violence and silence.

Jesus was telling his followers that we must live on a higher plane than what the law dictates. The law of Moses was good in that it limited retribution to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, rather than the tribal honor code that would say, “If you gouge out the eye of one of us, then our whole tribe will be coming to kill all of you.” That tribal-honor-code style of human interaction is what has kept wars going generation after generation in some countries and city streets. Whether he said it himself or not, Jesus would have agreed with the saying, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and soon the whole world will be blind and toothless.” For peace to come, someone, somewhere has to stop the tit-for-tat response. Someone has to take the blow and not return it. Someone has to absorb the loss and not demand compensation. In order to stop the endless cycle of pain and suffering, someone who has more resources has to be willing to give up what they have to someone who is in need.

Does that mean that we have to allow others to beat us up or take away all our material goods? No, I don’t think Jesus was saying that. When Jesus said, “Don’t resist evil,” he wasn’t condoning the Roman occupation and oppression of his day or the white supremacist actions of our day. He wasn’t advising victims to stay in situations of domestic violence, and he wasn’t indicating that we must allow our needy relatives or community members to “borrow” everything we possess. Jesus knew that we all must have some basics of life ourselves, or soon we will become the ones needing to beg.

Jesus was trying to help people find an appropriate way to respond so that they would live to see another day. He was suggesting that, instead of violence, we could use a good word to de-escalate

difficult situations. It's kind of like "the talk" that African American parents have sadly had to have with their children: "When a police officer stops you on the street, or pulls you over in your car, don't react with indignation or disrespect. Lower your gaze. Soften your voice. Be polite. Say, 'Yes, sir' or 'Yes, ma'am.' This is not the time to exert your rights or be sarcastic. This is the time to cooperate and comply fully with whatever is asked of you. This is important because your life and the lives of other people could be at stake."

Of course, there are times when we Christians are called to resist evil—like Jesus himself did—and Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and all the non-violent civil rights protesters since. We are called to make our voices heard against injustice. Sometimes that might put us in harm's way and require us to turn the other cheek. Most serious protesters know and are prepared for the fact that they could be hurt and arrested. That's one of the ways that non-violent protesters are able to get attention and sympathy for their cause. But they know they can't succeed if they destroy property, hurt other people, fight against the police, or fail to accept the consequences of their actions. A good word resists evil by using civil protest, courtesy, and respect—not words and actions of hate.

We who have never been oppressed may not understand how important Jesus' teaching was to his Jewish people. Their country was occupied by Roman soldiers who could demand anything of them at any time—or destroy them, if they chose. So Jesus was teaching that we have to get along with each other in order to survive. If we all use some good words of tact, maybe we will be able to keep all our eyes and teeth intact. Whether we're the one being put down, or the one who has resources to share, a good word strives for perfect love by responding peacefully.

## **2—BY LOVING OUR ENEMIES**

In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus points out that perfect love isn't a zero sum game, where we're just trying not to get hurt or hurt anyone else. "Do no harm" may be the appropriate first response, but a good word that strives for perfect love will also try to improve our relationships by loving our enemies.

That's quite a big step, and Jesus knew that we human beings would have a hard time loving those people who take advantage of us in one way or another. So he suggested a practice to help us. In verse 44, Jesus said that we should pray for those who persecute us. Maybe Jesus had figured this out from his own experience—that, if he prayed for someone hard enough and long enough, eventually he would find affection in his heart for them.

But Jesus didn't have to come up with this idea all on his own. Six hundred years earlier, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah had suggested this to his people who were taken as exiles to Babylon. Their Jewish kingdom, capital city Jerusalem, and temple had been destroyed. Many of their countrymen and women had been brutally killed. Others had been injured and tortured. Large numbers of survivors were hauled away to a foreign land and an uncertain future. They were afraid and grieving, suffering psychological trauma, and no doubt angry.

But Jeremiah didn't advise the exiles to resist, revolt, make plans for escape, or even hold a grudge. Instead, he wrote to the Jews to "build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; . . . multiply there, and do not decrease." In other words, Jeremiah told them to make the best of their bad situation and survive. That was step one. Then Jeremiah continued on by instructing those victimized exiles to "seek the welfare of the city where" God had sent them "into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf." Jeremiah told the exiles to pray for Babylon because they would find their own well-being in the well-being of that city.<sup>2</sup>

Pray for those who oppress you, frustrate you, or terrify you. Pray for those who lord it over you or annoy you. Pray for those who demand or beg too much of you. Pray for those who suck the life out of you. Whether they're random strangers, someone at work, or family members who hurt you, pray for your enemies—because when their situation is better, things will be better for you too.

A couple weeks ago, there was an article in *The Standard Examiner* about praying for your spouse. When I saw the headline, I immediately thought, ah, a typical LDS pro-marriage and family

perspective. But, as I read on, I saw that the article originated in *The Washington Post*, and it was reporting research that had been done by Florida State University. That scientific research conducted over two decades and numerous studies showed rather clearly that “praying daily for one’s partner has been linked to numerous positive outcomes: increased relationship satisfaction, [and] greater trust, cooperation, forgiveness, and marital commitment. Many of these benefits apply both to the prayer as well as the one being prayed for.”<sup>3</sup>

Hopefully our spouse isn’t our enemy. But we all know couples who thought they were in love and then became enemies. And, even in the best of marriages, there’s definitely the possibility of frustration, hurt, and anger. So, we should take this wisdom and apply it. A very good way to love our enemies is to use our good words to pray for them. And the more we say a good word of prayer for them, the closer we’ll come to God’s perfect love.

### **CONCLUSION**

A good word strives for perfect love by responding peacefully and by loving our enemies. And we do this because, as children of God, we are created to be like God, who helpfully shines sun and showers rain on both the just and the unjust because God loves them both. It’s God’s perfect nature to love all people equally. So, whether we’re talking about neighbors who treat us kindly or enemies who hurt us, we should love them all. Jesus never said it would be easy. But, our calling as Christians is clear. A good word strives for perfect love.

---

<sup>1</sup>Transcript from UM Communications video, “Advice from Children: Embrace Love,” [http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/advice-from-children-embrace-love?mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiWlRaaVpqUmtZbU0yTkRjMyIsbnQlOiIzRVpcL2xiYj0FDejFzSm5hczBncKFTMW05WU9PNlIPN2hnNU5QTU93MUYYSTAxemtRQXIMQ2F1K2xzM2NEaHZKcG50YUliTG1UYlpljMG1nVWV6a0RDVFljRFZndkxLNDhOSHBHVzhyQUIMOGZHc1BjV0t3K0lwYVYmVDVZeTgrZHIifQ%3D%3D](http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/advice-from-children-embrace-love?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWlRaaVpqUmtZbU0yTkRjMyIsbnQlOiIzRVpcL2xiYj0FDejFzSm5hczBncKFTMW05WU9PNlIPN2hnNU5QTU93MUYYSTAxemtRQXIMQ2F1K2xzM2NEaHZKcG50YUliTG1UYlpljMG1nVWV6a0RDVFljRFZndkxLNDhOSHBHVzhyQUIMOGZHc1BjV0t3K0lwYVYmVDVZeTgrZHIifQ%3D%3D)

<sup>2</sup>Jeremiah 29:5-7.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Burnett, “Frustrated with your spouse? These scientists suggest a specific kind of prayer,” August 12, 2017, p. B2. I added the italics to prayer, to clarify that the word refers to the one who is praying.