

LOVE IS A CHOICE...A TOUGH CHOICE!
Matthew 5:38-48

I. INTRO

- A. One of the secrets in learning how to cook almost anything is knowing when it's **done!** When we were first married, Lori and I visited some good friends who were in seminary. As a surprise, we brought some T-bone steaks—and a little Hibachi grill to cook them on. And I **burned** them! Those babies were crisp. I mean, they were polite, but as they gnawed on the edges—I could see it in their eyes, “What a **waste!**” -I also learned that in making fudge—after ruining enough batches to pave our parking lot. I also learned that, with chicken and pork—people don't like it rare! It's a funny thing!
1. It's pretty easy to know when the turkey's done—the little red button goes, **ping!** When bananas are mature—the skin is yellow.
 2. Of course, knowing when your **work** is complete is a little trickier. Is it done when every email has been answered, every phone call returned and every customer satisfied?
-When it comes to people being mature, complete—that's **very** hard to tell.
 3. And how do you tell if a follower of Jesus mature; complete—you know, truly becoming all Jesus meant for them to be? Down through the years, people have suggested a **lot** of things—lists of things not to do, religious things **to** do. Actually, according to Jesus—it's quite simple. He said that **love** would be the defining characteristic of his people. That's how Jesus lived—and that's how He died. If you read the New Testament—it's **saturated** with this concept. When it comes to spending money? Love God—love others. What about the government? Love God—love them. In fact—the Bible is very clear--**love wins.**
- B. In the Sermon on the Mount--Jesus' “I Have A Dream” speech where He outlines how the Kingdom—how the leadership and grace and power of God will get lived out in the lives of His followers—**love** is the basis for **everything** Jesus says.
1. He starts by talking about how **God's** love and kindness comes to spiritual zeros—turns their weaknesses to strengths--and totally transforms them into unstoppable people!
-Jesus then begins to explain how this kind of love and goodness plays itself out in everyday living. This love begins to replace resentment and contempt and lust. People are not obstacles—or objects; they are God's treasure.
-Love calls me to keep my promises and my vows—even when it's tough and inconvenient.
 2. And then Jesus takes the love test to its highest level. It's what we do—how we respond—to difficult people and tough situations. When we feel humiliated, stomped on—and taken advantage of. It's how we treat people who **really** don't like us—and make our lives miserable.

-This specific teaching of Jesus has been placed among his most demanding words. And sometimes people say, "It's impossible. I can't do it!" and walk away. Or—"This could be my finest hour." If we're interested in obeying, Jesus showed us **how!**

II. COMING FACE TO FACE WITH RELATIONAL EVIL

A. It's important to note that re-emphasize **who** is listening to Jesus give this talk about a whole new community—and how they will live and love. Israel was occupied by the Romans—with Roman soldiers everywhere. The people Jesus was talking to were extremely poor. Crushed, really. Most of them had one or two shirts or tunics—and one coat. There was no such thing as public assistance or health-care—so people with disabilities begged on every street. Jesus was not giving theoretical situations. This was their reality. And Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42 TNIV)

1. As barbaric as **eye for eye, and tooth for tooth** sounds, this command was taken from the book of Exodus—and was a huge advance in the justice of that day because it **limited** retaliation. What is our natural response when someone hurts or injures us? Tests show that we tend to up the ante. You insult me, I punch you; you knock me down, I shoot you.

-The point of **eye for eye** is that the punishment of an offense must be limited. Fair. No Dirty Harry stuff. But people were using it prove that God is okay with personal revenge.

2. And Jesus says, "Don't do it! There are **no** winners when it comes to retaliation."

-How many of you have ever encountered someone who challenges you? Someone you've loved and trusted steals your ideas. A neighbor reports your kid to the police. Someone humiliates you, damages your reputation, makes you feel small in front of the whole office. It's intentional--and it's clear—**they don't care!** That's where the rubber meets the road when it comes to loving others.

-I believe that what Jesus says here is absolutely brilliant. This is not doormat philosophy—"Just roll over and play dead—maybe they'll leave you alone." He's simply saying, "Retaliation **always** escalates a conflict—and you **will** lose!"

-Now, I need to confess to you my evil heart. There's something in me that **likes** retaliation! I heard a story about this biker gang that pulled into a truckstop—and all these guys swagger in with their black leather, tattoos and spiked dog collars. One of them singles out a trucker sitting there, eating his lunch and minding his own business.

-This biker begins to taunt him. “Hey, chicken man, what-cha eatin!” No response. He walked over and thumped the guy’s ear. Still no response. So he dumped the trucker’s plate of food on the floor and his coffee in his lap. . They guy just mopped it up, paid his bill and left. The biker said to the waitress, “That guy ain’t much of a fighter, is he?”

-The waitress said, “He ain’t much of a driver either. His 18 wheeler just ran over about 20 Harley’s out there!” We want to applaud! “Ye-e-s-ss! One for the little guy!”

-The issue Jesus raises is—when is the score even? After fifty slaps each? After the Tutsis have slaughtered 500,000 of the Hutu? When has enough blood been shed? When has there been enough humiliation?

-Jesus says, “If people who have the Spirit of God in them don’t have the strength to just **stop it--let it go...who will?**

-Notice what Jesus says; “don’t resist an **evil** person.” See, if you’re dealing with someone whose heart is bent on evil—the level of hassle and unrest you will introduce into your life by escalating things will **not** be worth the price you pay.

-Jesus says, “This is an opportunity...an opportunity for God to use a **much** stronger power than evil. And that power would be...? Love.

3. And then Jesus illustrates this principle of non-retaliation with four potential scenarios—things these people were likely to face. Please understand—these are not guidelines for governments in how to protect the vulnerable or develop national security. These are not rules to follow. They’re illustrations. The first: **If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.** A **lot** of people are troubled by this—thinking that Jesus is telling us to let our kids get bullied—or telling women to let their husbands treat them as punching bags. That is **not** what Jesus is saying!

-In Jesus’ culture, superiors—like slave-owners—would sometimes slap people they considered inferior on the right cheek—using the back of their left hand. This was one of the most humiliating things one human could do to another. To turn your left cheek would be asking them to punch you—and to do that, they declare you to be their equal. What Jesus suggests is brilliant—because it’s a non-violent form of resistance that exposes the cruelty of another person without escalating things.

-Can you see how far this is from being a “doormat?” It gave people who were humiliated a little dignity—and a choice in a tough situation.

4. Jesus uses three more illustrations. Someone sues for damages, digs up the dirt on you, and takes you to court to force you to give to them what you can’t **afford** to give them. A Roman soldier uses his legal right to force you to carry 80 pound pack of equipment for 1000 paces, leaving you sweaty and filled with resentment. A friend with a garage full of tools—borrowed from you--asks to

borrow yet one more thing. A disabled person asks for some financial help—and you can barely feed your kids.

-**What do you do?** Our instincts are to react. To counter-sue. To do what we're forced to do and seethe with resentment. To walk a wide circle around the people who want something from us.

-Jesus says, "People who follow Me—who have My Spirit in their hearts will, over time, have soft, generous hearts. They'll see that soldiers aren't monsters—they're people with souls. That making things **more** right than you're forced to is good for the soul. That a generous, good heart pays **way** bigger dividends than any money you save—or stuff that you stack around yourself. Softness, eyes that see, and generosity **feel** good—way better than resentment! **This is my chance to actually make a difference!**

5. Remember who's talking here. It's Jesus—Son of God. One who knows what life has always been like in the alleys and deprived places of the world; the one who foresaw Auschwitz and 9-11—and He says, "Get your ego and your personal sense of justice and self-righteousness out of the way and just **let it go!**

Loosen your grip on your ego, your need to be right, your stuff—choose **peace!** And in the long run, you'll not only be happier—you may actually win over the person who's set themselves against you!"

- B. Now—refusing to retaliate when someone humiliates you--or giving them more than what they sue you for—or going further than the person who powers up on you **ever** expects--that's tough stuff, isn't it? Well, Jesus takes it even further—to a place that has astounded the world ever since. Listen to what He says:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48 TNIV)

1. Let me tell exactly what Jesus is doing here. He is challenging what **everyone** would consider normal behavior. And "love your neighbor/hate your enemy **is** normal behavior, isn't it?

-As far as world system thinking goes, anyone know who your **neighbor** is? It may not be the person who lives next to you—in fact, it usually isn't. It's "your gang." It's the people who **are** like you—and who **LIKE** you. The ones you feel most comfortable with. You like hanging with them. They may not like the same music as you—but at least they don't put your music down. Your neighbor is your **comfort zone**.

-In the world system, anyone know who your enemy is? Well, it usually someone who knows you. Someone you may have once been friends with—or married to. But now they **really** don't like you. They avoid you, talk about you behind your back—maybe even give you dirty looks. If you're in public school, it's the person who disses you—and pushes you around.

2. Anyone here who's made through life and, so far, you haven't collected **any** enemies? Just wait. Anyone who has an enemy or two?

-Be brave. Bring their face into your mind. I'll bet you can! And when you see them or think about them, your temperature goes up—and your stomach knots up. I know, right now you're thinking, quite modestly, "Well, I don't **hate** them...!" So...how would you feel if a whole bunch of people started disliking them as much as you do—and their sewage backed up—and they got fat and grew warts—and the fleas from a thousand camels infested their bed...? -It's usually more subtle than that, isn't it? We distrust **them**, fear them—choose distance between us and **them**—leave churches over **them**. Cause...it's **them** and **us**.

3. But **Jesus** says, "Love them." He says, "Is someone making your life miserable? Turning the screws, applying pressure, sabotaging your reputation every chance they get? **Pray for them!** We think, "That's ridiculous. Why should I do something like that?" Any thoughts? Because it's **brilliant**. Because it's **right**. Because **love** and **prayer** is the only hope that there will ever be a change in them. It's your **only** hope—hear me—**ONLY HOPE** of escaping hatred. And soaking your heart in hate is like putting it in a jar of formaldehyde.

-Friends, it's because—if we as Jesus' followers can't learn to love and pray for our enemies—and just be like our Heavenly Father—and treat our enemies like He treats His, well, what hope is there for the world we live in?

4. So. How *does* God treat his enemies? Let me read it from The Message:

"This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty." (Matthew 5:45 MSG)

-Lori and I had two close friends when we lived in Pennsylvania named Dave and Pat Dunmire. Dave and Pat were two of the nicest, warmest, kindest, most faithful followers of Jesus I have ever met. Everyone I knew loved them. And yet their lives were touched with profound tragedy. They couldn't have children so they adopted. The little boy they adopted turned out to be so severely schizophrenic and violent that he had institutionalized. The little girl they adopted was ripped out of their home at the age of 10 by her birth mother and whisked away to California. Dave's mother developed cancer—then Pat developed cancer and died at the age of 43. How many of you know of a similar story?

-Have you ever thought, “Why wouldn’t God let that happen to Hitler or Osama Bin Laden?” Wouldn’t God have a better reputation in the world if He put a magic bubble of healing and good luck around **wonderful** people—you know, like us—and reserved cancer, halitosis, financial setbacks and the heartbreak of psoriasis for people who don’t give a rip about Him? But when you examine the records you find out that life insurance and health insurance costs the same—and gets used pretty much the same by everyone. Good and evil.

-Jesus says, “God loves His enemies-- that’s clear by how He treats them. You need to do the same.”

5. The question is—**why** would God do that? Well, the main reason is that God personifies love. When people are rude—and ignore Him, say He’s dead, spit on his Name—and ruin what He’s created—**that doesn’t change who HE is!** He still offers them His friendship—His life. It’s his **love** that ultimately overcomes their hostility and redeems them. It’s called GRACE. I saw a **great** illustration on that once.
 - a. Anyone know what this is? It’s a \$100 bill. Does anybody want it? Well, I’ll fix that. I’ll wad it up. It’s all wrinkled now. Anyone still want it? Well, you won’t when I’m done with his. Watch this. You’ve heard of filthy money—I’m going to **make** some! Anyone want it now? How about a little onion? How about if I write “**LOSER**” on it?

-Here’s my question: Why would anyone still want this thing? It’s because **what I’ve done to it doesn’t change it’s worth! The ones who printed it don’t like what I’ve done—so don’t tell them! But—they will still stand behind it despite what I’ve done to it!** And the same applies to people—no matter what their attitudes are, whether they’re dirty and smelly—whatever label someone puts on them, worthless, jerk, loser, cheat, embezzler, racist, pedophile—the **value** of their lives never changes. Not with God.
 - b. Type it into your palm pilot, burn it your hard drive, carve it onto your steering wheel, have it printed on your checks and credit cards—**PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT TO GOD THAN ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS UNIVERSE! PERIOD.** Not **some** people. Not just **His** people—members of His family. **All** people--even evil people.

-Know how I know that? Because I was once that enemy—and because God **loves** His enemies—offers them His friendship--He found me!
- C. At the end of this passage, Jesus gets right to the point of what God is trying to make out of us. It might blow you away—so buckle yourselves in. **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48 TNIV)** How many of you would say, “Yep! I’m almost there! Just a couple of small wrinkles to iron out—and I’ve got **that** one nailed!” How many...**not so much?**
 1. Let me explain the word Jesus uses—I think it might help. The word is **teleios**. Remember at the start, I raised the question, “How do you know if something’s

done. Complete?” That would be more the sense of this word. Anyone here ever picked an apple in July? What’s it like? Well, it’s about an inch across—and...**sour!** Is an apple that’s only an inch across—actually an **apple?** Of course—but it’s only when it grows and it’s skin turns color and the sweetness content goes up that it’s **teleios**—or **mature**. Do you see what Jesus is saying? **Grow up! Be mature! Be complete!** Don’t settle for a stunted, resentful, stingy little heart. God has much **bigger** things in mind.

-And it’s **very** clear from everything Jesus taught that mature people, **complete** people—are people who have learned how to love. When we genuinely love God and others—the rest tends to take care of itself.

2. Jesus has some words on that. Let me read them again.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (Matthew 5:46-47 TNIV)

-Translated? Some of the most violent twisted people in the world love those who love them! There’s absolutely nothing noble or remotely supernatural about loving those who treat you decently, call you friend, and handle your ego with care! Do you expect that God is going to put a gold star on the refrigerator in Heaven for that? Let’s call that what it is; a form of loving yourself!

3. The kind of love that caused Jesus, Son of God, to come and give his life so we, God’s enemies, could be reconciled to Him is way, **way** bigger! It’s the kind of love Jesus showed on the last night of his life as he washed the feet of Judas--just minutes away from turning him in to be crucified.

-It’s the kind of love that can endure rage, humiliation, flogging, and the worst kind of contempt this world can dish out. It’s **love of another kind**. And it comes from another world. Choosing Jesus’ leadership and Jesus’ Kingdom doesn’t magically plopp this outrageous kind of love into our hearts. We have to **choose** it. We have to **stretch** it. It doesn’t come by memorizing Bible verses or becoming a Christian TV junkie or singing songs about Jesus that make you cry. It comes when by **practicing** it. Exercising it—even when—and **especially** when we don’t feel like it. And that’s **exactly** what Jesus is asking us to do. Practice!

III. THE IMMENSE WORLD-CHANGING POWER OF LOVE

- A. This is tough stuff, isn’t it? Refusing to throw that last knife, get in the final word—giving when someone insists on taking. Praying on behalf of someone who can’t **stand** you and makes your life miserable. Why would Jesus even ask us to live like this?

1. It’s because Jesus is getting right into the guts—the daily grind of **becoming** a loving person. See, the question for you and me is, **Who determines what**

kind of person I will become? Is it my enemies? Is it people who make my life miserable—humiliate me, sue me, power up on me, demand what I have? -See, we all have this switch inside us that turns on our anger and our resentment—our sense that we are a victim of what someone else does to us. It's people who are close to us who have access to that switch. Sometimes it's family or people we work with—drive with. And sometimes it's the people Jesus describes in these illustrations. People who really don't give a rip about us. -Love is what protects this switch from getting flipped. When others have access to it, then they have power over us. And when we move into rage or resentment or retaliation mode—they **see** that reaction—and they feel justified in what they do. And we become their victim. Anyone here who **likes** being a victim? It's a powerless, humiliating, angry place to be.

2. Believe it or not, what Jesus is doing here is giving us another option. It's the option to grow. It's the option of developing the **love muscle** in our lives. See, the only way the love muscle grows stronger is when it's exercised on a regular basis.

-You could see it like this. If you want to develop **any** muscle in your body, what needs to happen? What if you just eat a lot of protein? Will that do it? What if you, like, become a muscle expert—you read everything you can on it—and visit gyms—and watch people exercise? You actually have to **exercise**. In fact, muscles don't grow unless they're under stress—and the cells are broken. -And that's the opportunity we have—when we're in the messiest, most traumatic situations of life. To be honest, it comes down to either being a victim—and feeling helpless and bitter and angry—or growth.

3. And loving starts up close. It's important to learn to express long distance love—love for people in horrible situations in other neighborhoods and other countries. But **learning** love happens when we're close enough to feel the sting of their slap, and smell the sweat on their equipment, and see the pain in their eyes when they ask for yet one more favor. **That's** where love becomes a choice. A tough choice. A really, **really** tough choice that we either make—or don't make.

-And that's what Jesus has been getting at all along.

*Love really comes down to the thoughts we think about others. Thoughts and inner words filled with anger and contempt don't lead to love.

*It gets into the world of our desires. We are called to love others more than our own sexual needs and desires—more than our desire for more money and stuff—and more than our own ego. Love is a **choice** we make in the world of desire.

*And learning to love has to come from our hearts. Not the **feeling** side to it—but the **will** side to it. We either love—or don't love—with the decisions we make, especially when life isn't going well.

- B. Love is a powerful, **powerful** choice. It's the choice to overcome evil in our world with good. It's the choice to keep my dignity as a person made in the image of God. The question is—**can I make it on my own?** And the answer is—sometimes—but not usually. We need supernatural power.

-And that's why Jesus came. He **died** to reconcile us with God—put our hand in God's hand—and put God's Spirit into our hearts. When we come to Jesus—and receive His gift of forgiveness and grace and life—sometimes we expect that loving choices will just automatically flow from us. That we get zapped good—roll around on the floor, twitch and drool. Then we just kinda automatically become wonderful loving persons. We just...let go...and **let God!**

1. Well, we do have to realize our own powerlessness—that we can't love like this on our own. But what happens is that we become apprentices of Jesus. We, in the tough moments, choose to love—even when we don't feel like it. We protect that retaliation switch—ask for help—and God's power flows.
2. One person who, in my opinion, lived out these words of Jesus magnificently was Martin Luther King, Jr. He faced precisely what Jesus talked about here. The humiliation, the hatred, the abuse, the unfairness of it all. And in all the junk, Dr. King made a choice to follow Jesus. He never wimped out. Never became a victim—but he **chose** to live, speak and stand with dignity. And the impact of his life was **massive**. Whatever you may think of the recent election results in the states—the fact that Barak Obama is now President points directly back to the influence of Martin Luther King—a flawed man to **dared** to be an apprentice of Jesus.

-The question you and I have to ask ourselves is very fundamental: **Do I want to become the person Jesus describes here?**

2. Love is the most powerful force in the world. And you need to know—every single time you step forward and choose love—darkness wanes, light shines—and it's a win for the Kingdom of Jesus. And you grow. And the salt adds flavor—and creates a thirst for God. And the reconciliation of this world to God—moves forward.

Love is the **best** choice you can make. Every time. No matter what you face. Love is a step **forward** into the goodness and blessing of God. And when everything else is all said and done in this world—the only thing that will count—is love. Love wins.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. Today, quite appropriately, we celebrate communion—and we celebrate Jesus—who did everything here that He asks us to do. He got slapped; he had his tunic and coat stripped off—and gambled for. As spikes were driven through his hands—he prayed for his enemies—the very people who rejected him—spit on him and killed him.
- B. The way He loved changed the world. And now—it's our turn. Today—as you take the cup—will you choose love?