

Are You Refusing to Obey Matthew 5:44?

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44, NIV).

As a new Christian, I must confess that I struggled with these words of Jesus. My concern was if we just loved everyone and prayed for everyone, the bad guys would just keep hurting people.

Perhaps you too wonder, *Is Jesus denying the idea of justice here? Are we just supposed to love everybody no matter what they do to us or to others? Is the popular but false picture true that the God of the Old Testament was a God of strict justice and wrath, and Jesus is the opposite, overlooking all that and loving everybody?*

Not exactly.

First, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not prescribing how the world should live together in peace and harmony. It describes life in the kingdom of heaven that has broken into the world as we know it, directly challenging the “normal” human way of living. Part of its purpose is to stir up and challenge a world where hatred is often the norm. So, that must be remembered.

Also, Jesus doesn’t give us isolated teachings to do with them whatever we want. As with any text, this one must be viewed in light of the entirety of Scripture. We have to take all of what Jesus said together. For example, in Matthew 23, Jesus rips into the scribes and Pharisees, calling them “children of hell,” and in Revelation 19, Jesus comes riding on a white horse to slay his enemies. Passages like these show that there was more to Jesus than “Let’s all just love everybody.”

The call to love is also not a general call to weakness or passivity. Justice is real, and justice will be done. Love does not mean ignoring evil and pretending it doesn't exist. We need to be stirred by injustice. But what true love does is recognize that vengeance is the Lord's (Rom. 12:19).

This does not mean we sit back and wait for some ethereal form of justice from God. He can and does use humans and institutions to bring justice in this world and this life. We can be thankful for God-ordained means of justice in the world such as governments, courts, police forces and the military (Rom. 13:4, for example). Sometimes, we as individual believers will make use of these, as Paul does in Acts 22:25–29, and other times we may be mistreated for the very reason that we are serving God. Nonetheless, Jesus' strong words should cause us to check our own life, heart and motives to see if we are seeing the love of God that flows to us also flow through us to others.

Is there anyone in your life who has hurt or angered you for whom you have not been praying? Will you pray for them now?

Mark Driscoll is a Jesus-following, mission-leading, church-serving, people-loving, Bible-preaching pastor and the author of many books, including *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, which you can preorder [here](#). He currently pastors The Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, with his family. For all of pastor Mark Driscoll's Bible teaching, please visit or download the app.

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