“Love your enemies.” “Turn the other cheek.” “Do not resist an evil doer.” Talk about hard commandments! Yet the plain meaning of these Scriptures couldn’t be clearer. Or could it?

Matthew 5:38-48
38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:38-48, NRSV
(Also Luke 6:27-36)

Read the passage aloud. Have others read silently from different translations of the Bible. Report any differences.

• How do the differences help you understand the text?

Make a list of the all the unexpected and radical things that Jesus says we are to do.

• What questions does the text raise for you? List those.
Look at Matthew 5:1, and scan the teachings of Jesus given in chapters 5-7. Today’s passage is part of the larger text referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Likely, Jesus said very similar things everywhere he went. (You may wish to compare today’s passage with the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:27-36.)

- Why would Matthew describe a mountainside setting where Jesus spoke about the Law? Who else spoke of the Law in a mountain setting?
- Why would it be important for Matthew to make that connection for his audience?

Placed near the beginning of the Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount also provides a benchmark. From this point forward, the reader is invited to judge the actions of Jesus and his disciples against his teachings.

- From your knowledge of Jesus, how well did he measure up to his own teachings? Give specific examples.
“If Anyone Forces You to Walk a Mile . . .”

Judea and Galilee were occupied by Rome. A Roman soldier could force someone to carry his burdens a prescribed distance. Like being slapped in the face, such a task was humiliating for the person forced to work for the Roman soldier and the hated empire he represented.

- Roleplay the situation. How would the choice to go the second mile affect the one who forced the first mile of service?
- Quickly roleplay an alternative. What would happen if you refused to do what was required or turned on the oppressor after completing the first mile? How much likelihood would there be of changing the oppressor?
- Why do you think Jesus advised the people not only to not resist this demand, but to walk the extra mile?
- “Going the extra mile” is a phrase commonly used today. Is it used today the way Jesus uses it here?
- In what situations today would Jesus’ counsel be an appropriate response?

“Give to Anyone Who Begs From You . . .”

The command to give to anyone who begs from you reflects a strong bias in Torah to share with those who are in need the blessings you have received. On the surface, it seems out of place with the other passages.

- What feelings do you experience in such situations?
- How is responding to someone begging from you like the other examples Jesus uses?
After Looking at Both the Text and the Context...

Deal with some or all of these questions before moving to What’s Next?

- What new insights do you have?
- What stands out to you in these teachings now?
- What answers have you gained to the questions you raised earlier?
- What new questions do you have?
- How radical are these teachings? Why?
- Which of these teachings is easiest for you to follow? Which is hardest?
- If more Christians were to follow these teachings, how would life be different?
- What one learning do you take from this Scripture that you will remember and apply to your life?
"Don't get mad—get even!" That popular bumper sticker also expresses a view held by some people. As a joke, it’s amusing. In real life, it can quickly become ugly. Someone is hurt and strikes back. The person struck, or someone close to him or her, retaliates. And so on. Thus the cycle of violence escalates.

Life is full of opportunities to hurt someone intentionally or unintentionally. Depending upon the response of the person hurt, the situation can quickly get out of hand. Christians are called to reject a life philosophy that perpetuates the harm and, instead, act to stop the hurt.

Working in small groups, make a list of examples people have experienced, witnessed, or heard about where someone was publicly humiliated or attacked by another. Do not limit yourself to situations in school or among your peers. Consider the conduct of prominent adults, including politicians, sports figures, or other people in the news. Use examples from movies or books too.

• How did that person act?
• What were the consequences?
• What could have been done to make the situation better?

Roleplay a situation in which a peer is insulting you.

• How can you respond to the situation in a way that doesn’t make it worse?
• What happens if the person simply won’t stop the bad behavior?
Picture in your mind a person who has hurt you. For three or four minutes, simply hold that person’s image in your mind, trying to see him or her as someone other than an enemy. Then pray that God might help you come to understand this person and to care about his or her well-being. You can pray as well for any change in the behavior of the person that you would like to see, but make the primary focus of your prayer that God would help you better understand that person—that God would help you to love this person, not necessarily with affection, but with a concern for her or his well-being.

In this space, or on a sheet of paper, write your reflections about this question: How is God speaking to me today through this Word?