



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 12**  
**Matthew 5:48: Topic 12.0**

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

Ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέ-  
 λειοὶ ὡς ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ  
 οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

Nein, wie die Liebe  
 eures Vaters im Himmel,  
 so soll auch eure Liebe  
 sein: vollkommen und  
 ungeteilt.

**NRSV**

Be perfect, therefore,  
 as your heavenly Father  
 is perfect.

**NLT**

But you are to be per-  
 fect, even as your Father  
 in heaven is perfect.

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

This single verse of scripture merits consideration as a focal point of study primarily because of its function in the text of vv. 17-48. The literary context is explained in detail below under **Literary Setting**. Additionally, the English translation of the original Greek text sets up a somewhat 'loaded' idea with the use of the English word 'perfect.' From the Enlightenment, i.e., die Aufklärung, on, the concept of perfection has accumulated a huge amount of philosophical baggage that was not in the thinking of the ancient world. Unfortunately, entire theological systems have been constructed off this philosophically saturated word known as 'perfectionism' or 'holiness.' Out of it have come entire Christian denominations. Thus such as study as we're undertaking is important for clear and accurate understanding of this pivotal scripture text.

**Historical Context:**

The holiness of God is central to this declaration of Jesus. Thus, understanding this concept is foundational to understanding the demand of the admonition to be holy.

The use of different terms both in the New Testament and in the Old Testament to describe the moral / ethical character of God has sometimes sparked confusion in the minds of Bible readers. In the Greek text here, the term τέλειός is used. This term, as a part of a complex of ancient Greek terms built off the common stem τέλει-, refers to the ideas of wholeness and completeness.<sup>2</sup> Even ancient Greek ideas of perfection, not to mention modern philosophical views, are not present in the biblical use of the terms. Matthew's use of this term to translate Jesus' original Aramaic term<sup>3</sup> is consistent with the literary function of this declaration as set forth below under Literary Setting. God is complete and is the very essence of wholeness. The six premise / contrastive declarations in vv. 21-47 push disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven toward that very completeness, and away from deficiencies created through the religious system of the Judaism of Jesus' day.

The Lucan parallel in his version of the Sermon in 6:36 reflects the Hebrew concept but from a non-Jewish orientation: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Γίνεσθε οἰκτίρμονες καθὼς καὶ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν οἰκτίρμων ἐστίν). Luke avoids a possible philosophical misunderstanding by his non-Jewish readers through using an emphasis upon God's generosity to humanity as a reflection of His righteous character.

The underlying Old Testament texts that this declaration builds upon are found in Lev. 19:2 and Deut. 18:13, and are quoted extensively in the New Testament.

**Lev. 19:2.** "1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: **You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.**" (LXX: Λάλησον τῇ συναγωγῇ τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ἐρεῖς πρὸς αὐτούς Ἅγιοι ἔσεσθε, ὅτι ἐγὼ ἅγιος, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν). For a similar emphasis to this one of Jesus, also playing off this Old Testament verse, see 1 Peter 1:15-16, "15 Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all

<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>"Heb. *tāmîm*, *šālēm*; Gk. *téleios* and cognates typically mean "complete," "whole," "mature," "unblemished," or "undivided." It is in contexts where the focus is on human or divine disposition that the theological conception of perfection becomes sharpened." [David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, eds., Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1028. S.V. "Perfection," by Jeffrey S. LAMP]

<sup>3</sup>Related to one of two Hebrew terms: "Two word-groups in the Hebrew Old Testament are translated "perfect" or "perfection": *tamam* [תָּמַם] and *calal* [חָלַל]. The former connotes wholeness, soundness, integrity, and often takes on ethical significance; the latter connotes completeness, perfection, and can carry the aesthetic sense of comeliness or beauty." [Robert W. Yarbrough, "Perfect, Perfection," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology.]

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your conduct; 16 for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" (NRSV; 1.15 ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸν καλέσαντα ἡμᾶς ἅγιον καὶ αὐτοὶ ἅγιοι ἐν πάσῃ ἀναστροφῇ γενήθητε, 1.16 διότι γέγραπται ὅτι *"Ἄγιοι ἔσεσθε, ὅτι ἐγὼ ἅγιός εἰμι.*)

Holiness in reference to God is His 'otherness.' The term refers to the difference of God from humans and from other supposed gods.<sup>4</sup> In application to God's creation, the term has a wide range of meanings:

In the Bible "holiness" is related, e.g., to the world of nature and of history, to the realm of human experience and conduct, to the election-covenant life of Israel, to the psychophysical life of the individual, and even to the destiny of nations. There it is the revelation of the holy presence which gives rise to the impulse to worship; where the Holy One manifests himself in the *hieros logos* as in the theophanies, altars and sanctuaries are erected to bring the event and word to holy immediacy and realization. Wherever God's presence is felt, there men encounter the wonder and mystery of holiness. It is, therefore, the religious word κατ' ἐξοχήν. While it often denotes a state or condition, it is for ancient Israel primarily an activity and a speaking which eventuate in relationship.<sup>5</sup>

**Deut. 18:13.** "You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God." (LXX: τέλειος ἔση ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου). The English translation use of 'completely loyal' for the Greek τέλειος that is also used in Mt. 5:48 is at first confusing.<sup>6</sup> The LXX Greek τέλειος translates the Hebrew תָּמִימַת (tāmītm) which means 'without defect' or 'blameless.' It is the flipping of the negative oriented Hebrew adjective into the positive oriented adjective 'perfectus' by the Latin Vulgate that lays the foundation for the early English Bible use of the English adjective 'perfect.' With the addition of the philosophical baggage to the English word 'perfect' coming out of the Enlightenment, the impetus for perfectionism theology, especially in the so-called holiness movement, found strength. The tendency in many branches of this movement is to fall prey to the heretical thinking of second century Gnosticism in which the body and soul are so distanced from one another that the soul can become perfect while the body remains sinful. This contradictory, false splitting of human nature runs completely contrary to the teaching of scripture with its emphasis on wholeness and unity of human existence. Sin permeates all of our being; God's cleansing grace likewise covers our entire existence. Particularly heretical is the view that in some highly charged religious experience the soul becomes perfected. Usually this heresy contends that glossolalia is the visible confirmation of this moment in a so-called 'second blessing.' But the reality is that in conversion we begin a pilgrimage toward becoming increasingly like our God in all our existence as His character and nature permeate our

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<sup>4</sup>"One does not define God. Similarly, the idea of holiness is at once understandable and elusive. Nevertheless, there is no term equal to the fullness inherent in holiness. All of heaven's hosts, Israel, and the church ascribe praise to a holy God because that idea sets him apart from everything else (Exod 15:11; Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). Holiness is what God is. Holiness also comprises his plan for his people." [M. William Ury, "Holy, Holiness," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology.]

<sup>5</sup>Source: iPreach > Biblical Reference > Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible > THE INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE > DICTIONARY ENTRIES > H > HOLINESS, by J. Muilenburg.

<sup>6</sup>For the wide range of translation words / phrases used for the Hebrew and Greek note the following:

NRSV: 13 You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God.

RSV: 13 You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

TNIV: 13 You must be blameless before the Lord your God.

ZB 2007: 13 Du sollst dich ungeteilt an den HERRN, deinen Gott, halten.

NASB95: 13 You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

NIV: 13 You must be blameless before the Lord your God.

The Message: 13 Be completely loyal to God, your God.

LB 1912: 13 Du aber sollst rechtschaffen sein mit dem HERRN, deinem Gott.

HCSB: 13 You must be blameless before the Lord your God.

GNT: 13 Be completely faithful to the Lord."

VBCLEM: 13 Perfectus eris, et absque macula cum Domino Deo tuo.

AV 1873: 13 Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God.

VUL SESB: 13 perfectus eris et absque macula cum Domino Deo tuo

EU 2: 13 Du sollst ganz und gar bei dem Herrn, deinem Gott, bleiben.

NET: 13 You must be blameless before the Lord your God.

NCV: 13 But you must be innocent in the presence of the Lord your God.

NIrV: 13 You must be without blame in the sight of the Lord your God.

NKJV: 13 You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

NLT: 13 But you must be blameless before the Lord your God.

KJV: 13 Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God

ESV: 13 You shall be blameless before the Lord your God,

BFC97: 13 Pour vous, conduisez-vous de manière irréprochable à l'égard du Seigneur votre Dieu.

being. Conversion positions us before God as righteous (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21<sup>7</sup>). Christian obedience begins the process of working out this imputed righteousness into our life and living (cf. Phil. 2:12<sup>8</sup>). That it God who enables us to walk this path is made clear by David in Psalm 18:30-32.<sup>9</sup> This is exactly the point of Jesus in Matt. 5:48. The theological label for this spiritual journey is sanctification, that is, the process of becoming holy in our living.<sup>10</sup> The process is not some magical experience that suddenly transforms us from sinful to perfection. To the contrary, it is a life long commitment to obey the teachings of Jesus in every aspect of our living (cf. Phil. 3:10-16<sup>11</sup>).

**Literary Aspects:**

Although but a single verse, the literary aspects of this declaration of Jesus are significant and have important implications for the interpretive process.

**Literary Form:**

The literary form, i.e., genre, of this statement is usually labeled a Sentence of Law in Form Critical approaches to the biblical text. The implication of this is simply that Jesus issues a solemn declaration that He expects His disciples to take very seriously.

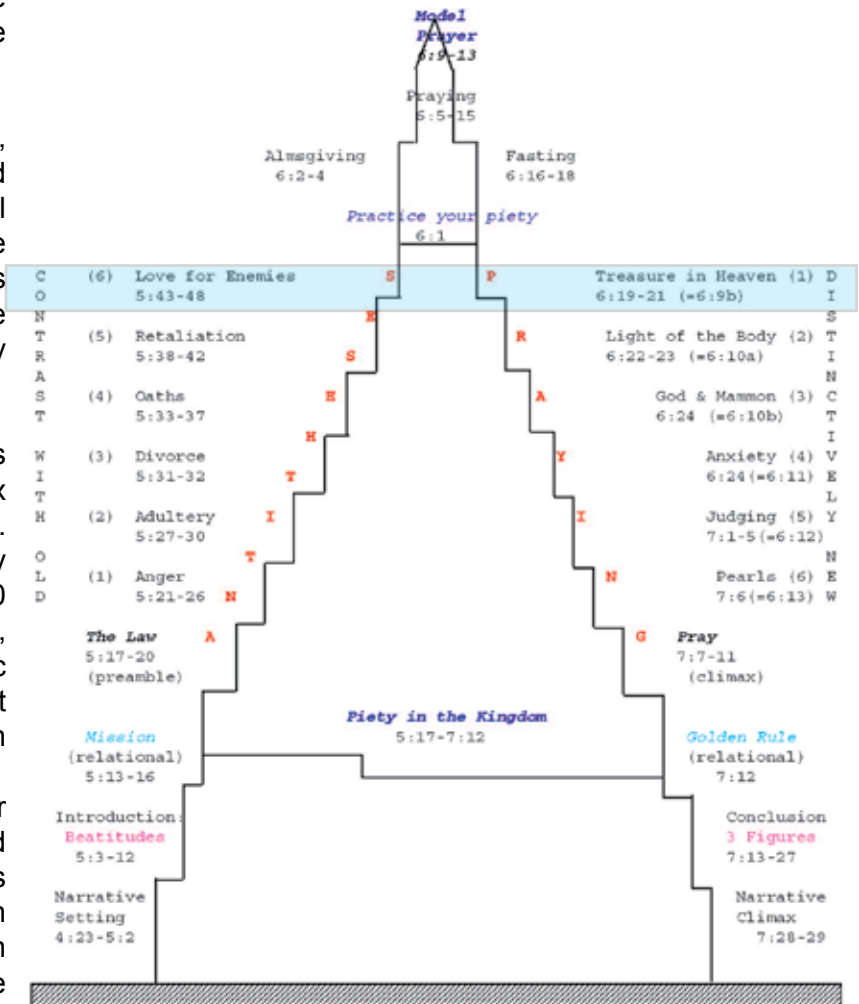
**Literary Setting:**

The literary setting of verse 48 is rather clear and easy to grasp. The six premise / contrastive segments in vv. 21-48 have 'book ends' as boundary markers (-----). Matt. 5:17-20 introduces these declarations of Jesus, and 5:48 brings them to a climatic conclusion. Consequently, one must understand the declaration of v. 48 in this contextual setting.

In so functioning in this larger segment of the Sermon, a profound shift takes place theologically. As the Old Testament Law had been interpreted by Jewish leaders in Jesus' day, the focus had turned to the individual becoming good enough to be accepted into God's presence. Each of

**The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount**

*Matthew 4:23-7:29*



Source: Lorin I. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

<sup>7</sup>“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him *we might become the righteousness of God.*” (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup>“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, *work out your own salvation* with fear and trembling;” (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup>“30 This God — his way is perfect; the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him. 31 For who is God except the Lord? And who is a rock besides our God? — 32 the God who girded me with strength, and made my way safe.” (NRSV)

<sup>10</sup>The Greek words ἅγιος (hagios) and ἁγιάζω (hagiazo) are translated holy, make holy in the New Testament, along with ὅσιος (hosios).

<sup>11</sup>“10 I want to know Christ F20 and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; 1 but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly F24 call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.” (NRSV).





ongoing viability of the Law of Moses, but made it clear that much of the interpretation of it by the religious leaders of His way was worthless and false. They had refocused religious obedience away from God and on to self-efforts at adhering to legal regulations which they had themselves developed. Although assuming these regulations to be based on the Law of Moses, their interpretations consistently misunderstood and misapplied the teachings of Moses. Thus, because of this Jesus made His shocking declaration in verse 20: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Their self-achieved righteousness had none of the character of God in it; thus, they failed miserably to achieve the wholeness of God.<sup>12</sup> Spiritual completeness that leaves nothing out means taking on the character and nature of God. And this is not theory. It includes living by these six principles set forth by Jesus in vv. 21-47.

### **Exegesis of the Text:**

In light of this last connection of verse 48 to vv. 21-47, it will be helpful to review the nature of Jesus’ responses to the Old Testament concepts raised in the premise segments of all six passages.

#### **Pericope 1: vv. 21-26**

**Premise:** 21 *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’*

**Antithesis:** 22 *But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

**Expansion 1:** 23 *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

**Expansion 2:** 25 *Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Here Jesus’ response affirms the viability of the Old Testament legal principles dealing with murder. But He goes beyond the outward violent action of murder to address the inner attitude of anger that leads to verbal abuse as well as to murder. His illustrations in expansions 1 and 2 underscore the spiritual urgency of seeking reconciliation (#1) and the practical consequences of not seeking reconciliation (#2). Positive relationships with others as the second prong of the vertical / horizontal nature of authentic religious experience is foundational to His emphasis.

#### **Pericope 2: vv. 27-30**

**Premise:** 27 *“You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.’*

**Antithesis:** 28 *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

**Expansion 1:** 29 *If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*

**Expansion 2:** 30 *And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.*

Once more Jesus’ response is to affirm the core principle of faithfulness in the marriage relationship as demanded by the Old Testament law. But where the Law and its interpretation focused on the faithfulness of the wife to her husband, Jesus extended the concept of adultery to include actions by the man as well, and not just with a married woman but with any female. Additionally, adultery includes the inner desire and willingness to enter into sexual relations with any woman beyond his own wife. The horizontal relationship demanded here stresses radical value and respect to be placed on women by men in a world moving the opposite direction. Discipleship in the Kingdom of Heaven meant going strongly against the stream of contemporary values both in Judaism and in the larger Greco-Roman culture. The two expansion

<sup>12</sup>Hear the testimony of a former Pharisee who made this same discovery: “2 *Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!* 3 *For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — 4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 *Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.*” The apostle Paul wrote these words toward the end of his life to the Philippians in Phil. 3:2-9.**

elements with their unusual, shocking demands serve to dramatically highlight the importance that Jesus attaches to the value and importance of women.

**Pericope 3: vv. 31-32**

**Premise:** 31 *It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'*

**Antithesis:** 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

This shortest of the six segments is the most demanding in many ways. Where contemporary Judaism in Jesus' day had focused on Moses' provision for divorce by the husband of his wife in Deut. 24:1-2, Jesus refocuses attention away from seeking to find ways of getting out of a marriage. As the larger more detailed discussions of this topic later in Matthew's gospel (cf. 19:1-12 with parallels in Mk. 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18) make abundantly clear, Jesus had no interest in getting trapped into the scribal debate over what Moses had declared about grounds for divorce. Instead, He called upon His disciples to commit themselves to God's original intention of marriage being one man and one woman committed to each other for life as set forth in Genesis two. Thus, the contrast of Jesus' response to the Law of Moses is a dramatic declaration of denial of how that passage was being used in His day. Once more the horizontal stress of Jesus is on positive human relationships and away from destructive ones. No expansion elements are given here.

**Pericope 4: vv. 33-37**

**Premise:** 33 Again, *you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'*

**Antithesis:** 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

**Expansion:** 37 Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

With the beginning of the second set of the six passages here, the focus again is an affirmation of the validity of the Law of Moses against false testimony and faithfulness to keep one's vows to the Lord. But in His response Jesus uses, in typical fashion, dramatic hyperbole to shockingly refocus attention away from the use of the Law of Moses as a means to subtly lie in promises and oaths. Once again the latter insights of Matt. 23:16-22 throws light on what Jesus was addressing here. The expansion element points to His ultimate aim of disciples with such integrity in their promises and vows that no oath is needed in order to claim truthfulness. Once more the nature of Jesus' contrast is to push the matter to inner integrity in speech. Positive human relationships depend upon trustworthiness.

**Pericope 5: vv. 38-42**

**Premise:** 38 *You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*

**Antithesis:** 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

**Expansion 1:** But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

**Expansion 2:** 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;

**Expansion 3:** 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

**Expansion 4:** 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

This second segment in the second series moves from integrity in speech to the issue of retaliation as set forth in the Law of Moses. The principle of *lex talionis* in the ancient world was intended to curb revenge to a level of equal damages. But Jesus' radical response pushes the disciple to follow the other mandate in the Law of Moses to turn vengeance over to God and to not take it upon himself to seek vengeance. Non-retaliation is the point of Jesus. Here four illustrations of what Jesus meant provide clear signals of how the Lord meant this point to work in day to day living. The applications are based on Jewish life and the Law of Moses, except for # 3 which was imposed by the Romans in the occupation of Palestine during Jesus' time. They include insult (#1); lawsuits (#2); and borrowing money (#4). The backdrop to each of these comes from the legal regulations in the Law of Moses. This paragraph seems to build upon pericope 4, as well as lay the foundation for pericope 6 that follows.

## **Pericope 6: vv. 43-47**

**Premise:** 43 *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."*

**Antithesis:** 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 he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

**Expansion 1:** 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

**Expansion 2:** 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

This final pericope in the second set of three brings the emphasis to a climatic high point. Jesus responds to both an Old Testament affirmation on loving one's neighbor in Lev. 19:18 and to a summary statement reflecting current misinterpretation of other Old Testament texts about evil and evil people. He affirms the first concept of neighbor love but disavows the legitimacy of the second. Contemporary scribal interpretation falsely understood God's 'hatred' of evil to mean a hatred of evil people and a subsequent demand for His people to do the same. In dramatic fashion Jesus demands not hatred but love of enemies -- very shocking to His audience that day. The two expansion elements re-enforce this principle by a progressive insult of those who only loved when loved (posture) and greet when greeted (action involving touch). To only do this means the individual is function no better than the least religious Jews, the tax collector, or even more insulting, no better than the pagan Gentile. God is not making a difference in such a person's life since the individual is doing what any non-religious person would do.

This point especially lays the foundation for the climatic emphasis in verse 48 on being like God. Thus as we survey these six areas we see more clearly what being like God means. Just as the Law of Moses demanded God's people be holy in the manner of God, Jesus reaffirms the same point. But now it comes out of personal relationship through discipleship in the Kingdom of Heaven where God is allowed to completely control the life of the disciple.

## **2. What does the text mean to us today?**

1) How spiritually whole are you?

2) Discipleship means becoming more like God. Are you making progress here?

3) Are you resisting the temptation to take shortcuts to try to gain spiritual wholeness? These lead to disaster and deceptive feelings of spirituality in the midst of a self-centered twisting of authentic Christianity. Consistent obedience day by day is the key. Are you willing to walk this path?