

Matthew 5:43-48 Love Your Enemies

INTRODUCTION

People of God, in the sermon on the Mount Jesus describes the righteousness that is to characterize his disciples if they are going to enter the kingdom of Heaven. It is a righteousness which must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. And is a righteousness which must flow forth from a true heart. The promise of the New Covenant is that God was going to write his law on the hearts of His people and cause them to walk in his ways. And when Jesus shows up as the prophet like Moses, his teaching is the Spirit empowered word that changes the hearts of its hearers to make them walk in His ways and observe his commands from a true and living heart of love toward God and neighbor.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

And so Jesus summarizes this section of his sermon thus far as not only love for neighbor, but even love for one's enemies.

He says, *"You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.'"*

Let's first look at Love for neighbor. This was the second greatest commandment, which is like unto the first. You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*. It is originally found in Leviticus 19:18, where it says: *You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

The key part of the law here is the part which tells you *how* you are to love. You are to love your neighbor *as yourself*. But the Jews of Jesus' day twisted the intention of the command by only quoting the part that said, *You shall love your neighbor*. They did not include the part that said, *as yourself*. And so the intent of the

law was changed. Instead of being about *how* to love your neighbor, the Jews changed it into a command about *who* they are to love. They thought they were to only love their neighbor, which they defined as “*the children of your people*” – their fellow Israelites and Jews.

Who am I to love, took precedent over How am I to love. This gives us insight then into why they asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor?” Which prompted Jesus to teach on the parable of the Good Samaritan. But the original point of the law was not to limit the object of your love, it wasn’t mean to limit the definition of who your neighbor is. It was to give guidance in how you were to love your neighbor, whoever that may be.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Which then brings us to the point, Who is my neighbor? Was it only “the children of your people?” Was it only one’s fellow Jews and countrymen? No. Your neighbor, as the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us, is anyone whom the Lord puts in your path. Even strangers, sojourners, Samaritans, or foreigners. And this is not just a New Testament teaching. A few verses later in Lev. 19, after the original command to love your neighbor as yourself is given, it says this, in verses 33-34. “*When a foreigner lives in your land, you must not oppress him. You must regard the foreigner who lives with you as the native-born among you. You are to love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.*”

So, just as you are to love your neighbor, so ought you to love the foreigner who is in your land. Fellow countrymen and foreigner alike, are to be treated the same – as a native born. And so that

tells me, that all whom the Lord puts in my path, whether they are from here or not, if I come across them in my travels and business, they are my neighbor, and I am therefore required to love them as myself.

Brief note – all this is in reference to one's personal interactions and private dealings they have with a person. Treating a foreigner as a native born does not mean a country must therefore have open borders. This is not a commentary about a nation's immigration policy.

I recently heard of border patrol agent who does not have many resources to her job. She has to cover a large stretch of the southern border by herself, with no back up. And she frequently has to arrest men who are bigger and stronger than her. And she often finds women and children left in the desert to die after being used the cartels to smuggle drugs. And so out of her own resources, out of her own money, and the compassion that is in her heart, she buys cases of water and food to take with her on her 4 wheeler, in order to give to these people who she finds dying in the desert. Her duty to secure the border does not mean that she does not arrest law breakers. Nor does it give her permission to mistreat people or neglect their basic needs for food and water and even medical assistance.

So, whether a person comes to this country legally or illegally, once they are here, and you cross paths with them, you are required to love them as yourself – whatever that may mean. It could be something as simple as saying hello with a smile on your face.

HATE YOUR ENEMY

Jesus' contemporaries argued, however, that the command to focus one's love specifically on his neighbor, actually implied that they were to hate all who were not their neighbor.

The Essene Community, who lived down by the Dead Sea, and who were responsible for collecting the Dead Sea Scrolls, one of the vows of their community was to "always hate the wicked and assist the righteous."¹

Now most Jews at that time did not limit the use of the word "enemy" to those who were extremely wicked, and who were hostile to them. They applied it primarily to those at a national level. Thus one's neighbor was a fellow Jew, and their enemies were Gentiles.²

This tendency for Jews to love only their fellow Jews was noticed by Roman writers Tacitus and Juvenal, who both inferred from the behavior of the Jews that hatred for non-Jews was a part of the Jewish religion.³ And for many Jews today, it still is.

And the reason so many people believed they were required to hate their enemy, was because the rabbis copied the grammar of the positive command to love your neighbor, and used it for the command to hate your enemy. For us today it would be like if someone quoted the command in King James English – *Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and thou shalt hate thine enemy*. And so people thought it carried with it the authority of the Torah.

The Jews carried on this tradition for a long time afterwards, such that some rabbis went so far as to say that Jews should even

¹ Quarles, Sermon on the Mount, 158-159.

² Ibid, 159.

³ Ibid, 160.

actively seek to kill Gentiles. Jewish medieval scholar Moses Maimonides was more lenient. He said that Jews ought not seek to kill Gentiles, at least not those they are not at war against, but they most certainly should not intervene to save the life of Gentile.

For instance, Maimonides said, if a Jew sees a Gentile fall into the sea; let him by no means lift him out thence: for it is written, ‘Thou shalt not rise up against the blood of thy neighbor,’ but this Gentile *is not thy neighbor.*”

This was the common teaching of the Jews of the day, and it is why what Paul says in Ephesians 2 is such a big deal:

¹¹ Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—¹² that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, ¹⁵ having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. ¹⁷ And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

That is a big deal. The merger of Jew and Gentile into one body was so revolutionary in the ancient world. But such is the power of the Gospel, that enemies can be made friends, and even brothers, for in truth they share the same Father who is in Heaven.

Now I want to remind you and so be aware about the tendencies of the sinful human heart, as it pertains to this question of who is my neighbor. When you redefine the meaning of who is your neighbor to not include anyone the Lord puts along your path, then your circle of who is your neighbor will grow increasingly small. Obviously. But, the thing to worry about is this, that as your circle of neighbors diminishes, so also the quality of the love you show to your neighbors diminishes as well.

Consider: Let's say your neighbor is only your countrymen. But then it is only a matter of time before you consider that some of your country men aren't actually that good. So then you will consider your neighbor to be only those who are good countrymen. But then it will diminish more to include only those who are in your tribe or sect. Then it diminishes further to include only those who agree with you on certain things. Then it is only those who agree with you about your one pet hobby horse idea. Until finally, you have entrenched yourself into a community of one, and you are the only one who is a true neighbor. Everyone else is an enemy. And you will treat them as such.

This is the inclination of the sinful heart if not checked by the law of love – which is not only love for your neighbor, but even for your enemy.

You see, the Lord Jesus does not want us to minimize the love in our heart. As he writes his law on our hearts, and causes us to walk in His ways, he is making us more like God, whose love is over flowing toward the wicked and the just alike.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

This principle of expanding the love of God in our heart is why Jesus then goes further and says, “*But I say to you, love your enemies.*”

Let’s talk first about enemies. So if everyone has potential to be your neighbor, does that mean that you no longer have any enemies? Not at all. For “in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the enemy is not merely a person with whom we have a personality conflict, nor is it even a citizen of another country with which he is at war. The enemy of the Christian is rather the one who persecutes the Christian disciple as an expression of his hatred for the Christian’s faith and his God.”⁴

An enemy is one who persecutes Christians because of their hatred for Jesus. These are the people who are described as evil and unrighteous. The person who has a different opinion than you about a secondary theological point, is not your enemy. The enemy is one who is diametrically opposed to all that the Christian disciple believes, stands for, and holds precious: his faith, his moral convictions, and of course, his Lord.

A disagreement about end times or baptism or the Lord’s Supper or predestination or marriage roles, does not constitute a wholesale departure from the Christian faith and is not out and

⁴ Quarles, 161.

out rebellion against Jesus. If you think that the person who doesn't agree with you about your secondary or tertiary issue is now worthy to be called Satanic because of their different opinion, then might I suggest, as I said earlier, you will not have many friends or neighbors left to love. Because you have just isolated yourself from your neighbor, whom you now consider to be an enemy. And, as Jesus says, whoever says, "you fool" – that is, to designate someone an unbeliever out of hatred in your heart toward them – is to be in danger of hell fire.

So your neighbor is expanded to include anyone who God puts along your path. And your enemy is anyone who is opposed to Christ and His teachings and who persecutes Christians for righteousness sake and for Christ's sake. Which we see in the NT, there are plenty of those around. And, we see that there are plenty of those around in our day as well.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

So, now that we identified who our enemy is, how do you love our enemies? Jesus says *"bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you (1 Pet. 3:16 falsely accuse you) and persecute you."*

An example of loving your enemy and doing good to him, is found in Exo. 23:3-4 - *"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. ⁵ If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it."*

This is an example of doing good to those who hate you. A modern day application could be something like this: Let's say you see some radical blue haired leftist with a pro-abortion and LGBTQ and co-exist stickers all over their car, and they stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire. You are required by the law of love to help them. And while you are changing their tire, you should pray for them, that they would be saved and come to salvation.

Or maybe you find out that their car is broken and you have to call a tow truck to pick them up, an added measure of love would be to pay for the tow truck. And if you were really wealthy, maybe even pay to have their car fixed. That is not required, but you see how loving another, even your enemy, is how you would want to be treated.

Which does not mean, treat other people the way they treat you because that must mean that that is how they want to be treated. No. You treat others how you want to be treated. You bless others because you want to be blessed. You help others because you want help. You pray for others, because you would want someone to pray for you.

Jesus says that you should pray for those who are spitefully using you, or who are falsely accusing you, and who are persecuting you. And the grammar of the Greek indicates that the accusations and persecutions are actively happening, right now. So, as you are being falsely accused, as you are being mistreated, as you are being persecuted, you are to pray for them. This is what Jesus did. As he was being crucified, he prayed for his enemies. While Stephen was being stoned to death, he prayed for his enemies. And what

did they pray for? Father forgive them, for they know not what they do. They did not pray, Father destroy them, for they are evil and wicked.

Imprecatory prayers are legitimate prayers. If not, we would have to get rid of like half the Psalter. But because the love of God is meant to increase in us, so that we **become more like God in His acts of kindness**, we should seek to love our enemies the way God does – by being merciful and kind and bestowing good gifts on them, even while they are persecuting us and actively doing us harm.

*“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
If he is thirsty, give him a drink;
For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”*

As we heard in our Epistle lesson today, God has made known the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy. Which means that we are not only vessels whom God has shown mercy to, but we are vessel created and redeemed in order to show the mercy of God unto others. We are not vessels of wrath. We are not destined for wrath, and therefore we are not to show wrath to our enemies. Vessels of wrath are those who seek to inflict vengeance on others. Vessels of wrath are those who strike you on the right cheek. They are those who sue you to take your tunic. They are those who persecute you for righteousness’ sake. Vessels of wrath take vengeance into their own hands. Vessels of wrath hate their enemies.

But that is not what we have been called to, People of God. We have been called to bless and not curse. We have been called to

show mercy, not wrath. We have been saved to do good to our neighbors, and to our enemies alike.

SONS OF YOUR FATHER

Because this is what our Father in Heaven does. And Jesus says we are to do this so that we may be sons of our Father who is in heaven. Sons imitate their father' Well Jesus wants us to imitate our Father, and do good to the just and unjust alike.

And the illustration Jesus gives here is based on the benevolent love of God for his creation. He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good alike. He sends rain on the just and on the unjust alike. God's love and goodness overflow from his own divine goodness and love for each of the other members of the Trinity, such that he does good even to those who hate him and deny his existence and break his law and kill his people. God is so loving and kind to even his enemies, that he can say through the Prophet Ezekiel, that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

You see, God is not willing that any would perish eternally apart from Christ, but that all would come to repentance and saving faith. That is what the general revealed good will of God is for his creation. And this is the character of God that Jesus appeals to when he says: *for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the just and on the unjust.*

In Luke 6 the point is made even more explicit:

²⁷“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. ²⁹To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other

also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. ³¹ And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

³² “But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. ³⁶ Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.

In other words, it is the kindness of God that leads to repentance, as Paul says in Romans 2. And so, as God is kind to the world, even the world that actively hates him, even the world that killed his beloved Son, so Jesus calls you to be like your heavenly Father in this regard, and love your enemies by doing good to them.

WHAT REWARD DO YOU HAVE

Then Jesus backs up his command to love your enemies as God does, by appealing to a reward. He says, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?” You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

When Jesus asked them what reward they have for only loving their brethren, their fellow countrymen, his implied answer is,

that the greeting itself is the reward. He says in the next section when talking about doing charitable deeds, that the hypocrites do their deeds out in the open sounding trumpets to let passersby know they gave money to the poor. And the reward they have is the glory that comes from men.

Likewise, if you greet only those who are like you, if you show love only to those who you narrowly define as your people, then their greeting back to you is all the reward you get. But if you desire to have a heavenly reward from your Heavenly Father, then you must expand the love you have in your heart to include others who you would not think of as your neighbor and who are even your enemy.

This is the righteousness which exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees. For the Scribes and Pharisees were not even doing what their own enemies – the tax collectors and Gentiles – were doing. And so, they have nothing to boast about, except that they received greetings from other people whose hearts were also like the Grinches, two sizes too small.

YOU SHALL BE PERFECT

Jesus concludes this section saying, “*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Heavenly Father is perfect.*” And this saying is a summary of all that he has taught up to this point, and I think it the climax of the whole sermon.

Jesus does not mean that you must be sinless, without error, and never make a mistake. That is not what perfect means here. Perfect means whole-person behavior that accords with God’s

nature, will, and coming Kingdom in Jesus.⁵ Being perfect is the opposite of being a hypocrite. A hypocrite says one thing and does another. They pretend to be righteous but they are actually inwardly corrupt. They feign righteousness and act as if they keep God's law, but their hearts are far from him. These are people those people that Jesus says, *You will know them by their fruits*. Because their words and actions are different.

If you desire to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, a righteousness, without which, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven, then you must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. You must not be a hypocrite, and you must love your neighbor as yourself, and you must love your enemy as well, just as your Heavenly Father loves them and does good to them. Only in this way will you receive your reward. Amen.

⁵ Pennington, 206.