

5. Discrimination and the Ethic of the Kingdom (5:43-48)

Jesus appropriately concluded His treatment of His kingdom's ethic in relation to the Mosaic Law by highlighting the matter of *love*. From the time God made His covenant with Israel at Sinai, the Jews understood that love was the essence of their covenantal obligation. That covenant – the Law of Moses – established and defined their relationship with God as His national covenant “son,” and so also defined their relationship with one another as individual sons of Abraham. And because Israel's calling as the Abrahamic “seed” had global implications (cf. Genesis 12:3 with 18:17-19, 22:15-18, 26:1-5, 28:10-14), the Law further addressed their relationship with the surrounding nations.

- a. The Jews recognized that the Law was ultimately concerned with the obligation of love – love first and foremost to their covenant Lord and Father, and secondly to their fellow man (cf. Mark 12:28-34 with Matthew 22:34-40). (This two-fold obligation is emphasized in the two tables of the Decalogue as the heart of God's covenant with Israel.) The first obligation was never in question, nor was it subject to interpretation (despite Israel's obvious failure to fulfill it); the second, however, had become confused and abused over the centuries. It wasn't that the Jews didn't acknowledge their responsibility to love their neighbor; the problem was that various factors had led to a narrow, ethnocentric definition of “neighbor,” and this issue stands as the focal point of Jesus' closing instruction in this section of His discourse: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy’*” (5:43).

Here again, those who view the larger context as Jesus' attempt to recover and reassert God's “moral law” find a simple meaning in this passage. They argue that the Law of Moses never called the sons of Israel to hate their enemies; this notion was rather a rabbinical distortion by which the Jews could justify applying the law of love to only their fellow Israelites (or even more narrowly in the instance of the Qumran community and other sectarian groups). All others were “outsiders” to whom they had no obligation of love. Jesus was therefore simply confronting this error and reaffirming the Law's demand of love for all men. As attractive as this view may appear, it has at least two significant problems:

The first has already been addressed with the previous case examples, namely that it fails to take into account Jesus' opening declaration that, in Him, the Law was being *fulfilled*. Simply reminding His Jewish audience that the Law called them to love their enemies rather than hate them does not in any way constitute fulfillment. Jesus used His “You have heard... but I say to you...” structure to show in general terms how the Law was being fulfilled in Him, and this final case example was no exception. Not clarification, but christological fulfillment and transformation were the issue in His redirection (“...but I say to you...”).

The second problem is that this view is far too simplistic. First of all, the Mosaic obligation of neighborly love was broad and provided no explicitly concrete definition of a “neighbor” (cf. Exodus 20:16-17, 21:12-14, 22:7-15; etc).

But to the extent that the Law did define the concept of “neighbor,” it seemed to indicate that a *fellow countryman* was a neighbor (ref. Leviticus 19:17; cf. also Exodus 12:3-4, 22:25-27 and Deuteronomy 4:41-42, 15:1-3).

Beyond this, the Law did establish certain men as *enemies*: Israel’s enemies were those who opposed God, His covenant, and His covenant people. Initially, this term applied to the nations of Canaan whom God would destroy in removing them from His sanctuary land (Exodus 23:20-28; Numbers 10:33-36). Later, it referred to any and all people groups that opposed or threatened Israel’s security and peace in the land (Leviticus 26:3-39; Numbers 10:9). And, while the Law of Moses didn’t specifically command the sons of Israel to hate their enemies, it did directly and explicitly require them to *destroy* or *subjugate* them and radically *disassociate* themselves from them and their culture and practices (cf. Exodus 23:20-24; Numbers 21:1-3; Deuteronomy 3:1-6, 7:1-26, 13:6-15, 20:10-17 and 33:26-29; cf. also Joshua 11:1-23). The Law established Israel as Yahweh’s unique covenant “son,” and this meant that the nation was to live as a people fully consecrated and devoted to Him; *all who threatened or interfered with their covenant identity and life were to be regarded as enemies and dealt with severely.*

- b. To say that the Law of Moses had required the sons of Israel to love their enemies is to seriously misjudge and misstate the case. It is true that, in at least one context, the Law did prescribe a benevolent attitude toward enemies (Exodus 23:4-5), but these were clearly *personal* rather than national enemies, and this fact together with the larger context argues that these “enemies” were fellow Israelites with whom a person had an estranged relationship. In this way, this commandment to do good to an “enemy” was simply a reiteration of the Law’s general requirement of love for one’s fellow countryman (Leviticus 19:13-18).

Many commentators have rightly noted that, by the time of Jesus’ birth, the people of Israel generally had an attitude of open disdain for non-Jews, whether Gentiles or Samaritans. It is also beyond question that self-righteousness and arrogant ethnocentricity contributed to this attitude, and, in this respect at least, the Jews’ hatred of their enemies clearly did amount to a violation of the *spirit* (if not the letter) of the Law.

At the same time, the unrighteousness in Israel’s ethnocentric attitude doesn’t alter the fact that the Law – and thus God Himself – demanded of the Jews a certain kind of ethnocentricity. By divine choice and calling, Israel was a singular people, uniquely set apart for God and the privilege of covenant sonship (Exodus 19:1-6; Deuteronomy 7:1-8; cf. Malachi 1-3; Romans 3:1-2, 9:1-5). *Whatever their sinful failures, it remains that the sons of Israel were commanded to make a very real **distinction** between their fellow countrymen and the surrounding nations.* (Note that the Law’s prescription regarding “aliens” pertained to Gentiles dwelling among the covenant people, most likely as proselytes – Exodus 12:17-19, 43-48; Leviticus 16:29-31, 17:8-16, 19:33-34; Numbers 9:9-14; etc.).

The Law that called the sons of Israel to love their countryman (“neighbor”) also required them to separate from, oppose, and even destroy their enemies. While it didn’t explicitly command them to hate those enemies, Paul himself recognized that the Law did institute Jewish enmity toward the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-15).

- c. And so, like its predecessors, this final example case cannot be interpreted as clarifying or recovering the “pure” Law. The Mosaic Code never instructed the sons of Israel to love their enemies, but that is exactly what Jesus was commanding: “...but I say to you, you shall love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44). Consistent with the entire section, Jesus was again proclaiming to His hearers the fulfillment of the Law in Himself – a proclamation that He knew would appear to them to be His attempt to abolish the Law.

As with the other case examples, the key to Jesus’ startling transition from the Law’s *oppose and destroy your enemies* to His demand, *love and pray for your enemies*, is recognizing the way the Law has been fulfilled and transformed in Him. Once again, that begins with understanding how this particular obligation of the Mosaic Code functioned in the Israelite kingdom.

The distinction between *neighbors* and *enemies* was fundamental to Israel’s national, theocratic identity and role. Collectively, the nation of Israel was the covenant “seed” of Abraham, chosen by God from all the earth’s peoples and set apart to Him by covenant. Israel was God’s *ecclesia* – His exclusive congregation of “called out ones,” and the numerous laws of separation and distinction (diet, dress, lifestyle practice, cleanness, etc.) pointedly reminded the nation of its consecrated status; Israel was uniquely God’s possession – His elect “son” taken from the world and set apart to Him and His worship and service.

And as Israel was a separate *people*, so the Israelite *kingdom* was uniquely God’s kingdom on earth. It was in the context of the Israelite kingdom that God manifested His presence in the earth, and it was through the Israelite nation that His words and works were to be disclosed and interpreted to the rest of mankind. The kingdom of Israel – having its focal point in the divine sanctuary and the ark of the covenant as the symbolic footstool of God’s throne – was the singular point of His connection and interaction with His creation. The Israelite kingdom symbolized “sacred space”; everything outside it was “without God” (profane and unclean – Ephesians 2:11-12). Thus the sons of Israel and their consecrated lives with God were to be untouched by the corruption of the surrounding nations; *Israel was to mediate the knowledge of God to the world, but it was to keep itself free of the world’s corrupting and polluting influence.* This required two things:

- First, Israel’s kingdom land – which was Yahweh’s holy dwelling place (Exodus 15:17) – had to be purged of all uncleanness. This was the purpose for God’s command to the sons of Israel to wipe out every vestige of Canaanite culture. These who were outside of and opposed to God’s kingdom were *enemies* – His enemies and enemies of His people.

- But having purged the sacred land of its defilement, Israel still needed to be on its guard against the corrupting influences that continued to exist around them and constantly pressed against them. The destruction of their “enemies” in the initial conquest and settlement of Canaan didn’t eliminate all enemies; forces within as well as without continued to threaten Israel’s authentic existence as Yahweh’s consecrated son.

Thus, from the Old Testament’s vantage point, the categories of *neighbor* and *enemy* were national and theocratic rather than personal. “Neighbors” were all those who dwelled in God’s kingdom under the definition and prescription of His covenant – whether physical sons of Abraham or Gentile proselytes. Conversely, “enemies” were those outside the kingdom: the world of men whose estrangement from God set them innately against Him, His kingdom, and His people.

It is precisely because of who these “enemies” were in relation to God and His purpose and accomplishment in the world that He commanded His covenant “son” to oppose them. The covenant Father Himself opposed them – *not because they were “bad” people, but because they impeded and threatened the establishment and well-being of His kingdom. God was testifying to the foundational truth that His kingdom would be established through the destruction of His enemies:* This was the case with the preparatory, typological Israelite kingdom, and it would be so with His final, everlasting kingdom. Everywhere, this is the message of God’s prophets, most succinctly expressed in the prophetic doctrine of the *Day of the Lord*. That doctrine speaks of the twin themes of judgment/destruction and deliverance/restoration: *God’s sovereign, personal judgment and destruction of His adversaries that secures the liberation of His captive people so that they should be regathered to Him in His kingdom land.* The Flood event was the first manifestation of the “Day of Yahweh,” but the Exodus is its single greatest example in the Old Testament history. Later, it was reiterated in the return from Babylonian exile (Isaiah 13:6-14:6; Amos 5:18-27). These events, in turn, provided the foundation for the ultimate promise of a future day of comprehensive, everlasting judgment and deliverance (Joel 1:15-2:32; cf. also Amos 5-8 with 9:1-15; Obadiah 1-21; Zephaniah 1-3; etc.).

Now, with Christ’s coming, God’s appointed day for judging and destroying His enemies – the prophesied Day of the Lord – had finally arrived (Malachi 4:5-6; cf. also Joel 1:15-2:32 with Acts 2:14-24). The Lord had established the preparatory Israelite kingdom through the *physical* destruction of *physical* adversaries; now He would establish and secure the everlasting kingdom of heaven through the permanent destruction of His *spiritual* enemies. The New Testament (and the prophetic witness of the Old Testament) shows this work to be two-fold:

- 1) First and foremost, God has, *in His True Israel*, judged and vanquished His arch-enemies of human and creational estrangement and the “god of this age” who secured it (cf. Genesis 3:1-15 with Colossians 1:19-20, 2:13-15; also Luke 10:17-19; John 12:27-33; Hebrews 2:14-15).

- 2) But He has also judged, and will finally condemn, the world of unbelieving men – those “enemies” who insist upon opposing His kingdom of restoration and reconciliation by remaining estranged from Him (cf. John 3:16-21; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Revelation 20:11-15; ref. also Matthew 12:30-32; John 5:24-47, 8:31-59).

God’s righteous opposition (His “hatred” – Psalm 5:4-6, 11:5-7) of the enemies of His kingdom and people – the eradicating opposition He demanded of His “sons” – has now been satisfied by the purging indignation of His Son’s cross. *Just as exacting justice has been satisfied through condescending mercy, so God has satiated His righteous hatred through the exercise of His love for His enemies.*

- The Son’s yielding to injustice at Calvary satisfied in full the demands of true justice, and so the sons of His kingdom – those who share His life and likeness – are to follow His example (5:38-42; cf. 1 Peter 2:1-25).
 - In the same way, the Son’s self-giving love for His adversaries and persecutors – the love that perfectly expressed the love of His Father who sent Him (John 3:16) – fully appeased God’s righteous indignation toward them. So it is that those who are His brethren – that is, true sons of His heavenly Father – manifest the same love (5:45-48).
- d. The love expressed by the sons of the kingdom is the love that characterizes their divine Father and His only-begotten Son, and Jesus testified to this in two ways. He did so first by explicitly declaring that the exercise of this love provides irrefutable proof that they are sons of God (5:44-45). All men are capable of possessing good Christian doctrine and religious and moral rectitude; only those born of the Spirit are able to love with the authentic love of God (1 John 4:7).

Love as a divine endowment points to the second way Jesus affirmed the sons of God as those who love. Knowing that His hearers believed they were obedient to the Law’s demand of love, Jesus declared to them that what they regarded to be love was nothing of the sort: *What men call love is only one more expression of their estrangement, self-isolation and self-concern* (5:46-47). People “love” those who “love” them and embrace those they regard as their “brethren” (members of their accepted community – family, friends, etc.). Being incapable of *authentic* love, human beings “love” those who meet them at the point of their pride and self-concern – those who affirm and approve them; those who are “one of them.”

But this is not how God loves: Rather than being self-seeking, He is self-giving; He loves those who resist and oppose Him (5:45; cf. Romans 5:1-8), showing that His ways and thoughts are not ours (Isaiah 55:1-9). *So God’s hatred destroys in order to purge, renew, and restore.* His love led Him to take the deserved blow in His Son, and now He calls all men to come and find life in Him. And transformed by the Spirit into the likeness of Him in whom all the fullness of deity dwells, the sons of the kingdom attain to His perfection – the perfection of the divine image.