

Matthew 5:43-48

Excelling in Love

What do ye more than others? – v. 47

If any one had doubts about the matter of the high standards of the Kingdom of Heaven – then v. 48 would have to erase the final traces of any doubt. *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* Who can possibly hear or read such an exhortation and still hold the notion that he's qualified for the Kingdom of Heaven? This exhortation places the Kingdom of Heaven beyond our reach. We haven't measured up to this standard and we won't measure up to this standard.

Look at how perfection is defined in this verse. It's defined by the very character of God Himself. *Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* How perfect are we to be? What is the standard by which we are to gauge our perfection? How can we tell if we're getting close? The standard of perfection that we're called on to fulfill is the standard of God Himself.

Ironically, this is a standard that man could and did reach in his original creation. Made in the image of God he conformed to the standard of God. And I should add that this standard was what man was expected to maintain – and he was given all he needed to maintain it. He was made, you see, with knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The standard that Christ holds out in this exhortation is not a new standard. And the fact that man fell into sin and took the whole human race with him in no wise abrogated this standard.

Were it not for Christ's stated purpose in coming into this world found in v. 17 we would be forced to conclude that the Kingdom of Heaven is beyond our reach and we could spare ourselves the trouble of striving in vain. But note again what Christ says – *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.* Here is One that could meet and did meet the standard of perfection.

And when we come to know the blessedness of our union to Him then it puts our striving into a completely different perspective. This is what delivers us from spiritual bankruptcy. This is what comforts us and fills us – this assurance that we are joined to Christ in His fulfilling of the law. And the motivation that this assurance ought to stir in our hearts should move us to strive in such a manner that we stand out from others.

One of the things that I have at times found disturbing about Christians is the fact that cults who are largely motivated by guilt can be more zealous in their devotion than Christians who ought to be motivated by grace and love. The greatness of our blessings should fill and thrill our hearts in such a way that we stand out from others in this world. How convicting, then, to hear Christ raise the question in v. 47 *what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so?*

The publicans were the most despised people in the nation of Israel. They were viewed as traitors. They were known to be cunning and shrewd in the way they made money

collecting taxes for the despised Roman Empire. But even they knew how to show respect and courtesy among their own lot – even they could do good within the sphere of their own circle of friends. The point that Christ is emphasizing in this paragraph is that Christians ought to do more. The subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven should excel above and beyond those that are outside the Kingdom. And especially is this the case when it comes to the issue of love. This is the primary focus of Christ in this final section of chp. 5.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy; but I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you.

The emphasis in these words is on the Christian's love. And the words that follow give further explanation as to how and why the Christian is called upon to manifest such love. In this area in particular he is called upon to bear the family resemblance to his heavenly Father *that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven*. And so I want to focus on that theme this morning – this matter of excelling in love. As true subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven:

We Must Excel In Love

Would you consider with me, then, first of all:

I. The Theological Foundation for Excelling in Love

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. The first part of this statement about loving ones neighbor comes from Lev. 19:18. The second part of the statement about hating ones enemy came by inference from the Jews. There is no such phrase to be found in the Old Testament.

And yet the inference was not altogether unfounded. For example – when the Jews entered the promised land they were commanded by God to exterminate the Canaanites. They were told that the Amorites, the Moabites and the Midianites were not to be treated with kindness. Later in their history, during the days of King Saul they were commanded to do the same to the Amalekites – a command, you may recall, that was incompletely carried out by Saul and because of his incomplete obedience he forfeited his role as king.

And then there's the matter of the imprecatory Psalms in which curses are called down upon certain people. *Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them* (Ps. 69:23,24). Can these examples be said to exemplify loving your enemy as well as your neighbor? Or is this an example of Christ modifying the law by raising the standard higher for a new dispensation?

The difficulty might be viewed as compounded by the fact that Christ refers to His heavenly Father for the foundation of this precept. Why are we to love our enemies? Christ

gives the answer in v. 45 and it's a theological answer that bring the example of God Himself into the picture. *He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*

And yet – wasn't it God Himself that gave the command to exterminate the Canaanites? And wasn't it God Himself that inspired the Psalmist to pray such prayers as the one we find in Psalm 69? We certainly know that we're to acknowledge the sovereignty of God in all things. It was God Himself in His sovereign action that brought a flood upon the world. It was God Himself that sent fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah and destroyed those cities. Critics of the Bible are so much aware of the many manifestations of God's judgment in the Old Testament that they mistakenly conclude that the God of the Old Testament is an altogether different God than the God of the New Testament.

And if we're not careful in our theology we can fall into the same trap that the Jews of Christ's day fell into and can draw the wrong inference from Scripture that we are justified in hating our enemies. And if we don't go so far as to hate them – we can at the very least be cold and indifferent toward them – we certainly don't have to go so far as to love them – or do we?

Lloyd-Jones deals at length with this dilemma and he points out that the solution to the dilemma is to recognize a judicial element to God's dealings. *There are people who have foolishly interpreted this to mean that the love of God is universal absolutely, and that it does not matter whether a man sins or not. Everybody is going to heaven because God is love; because God is love He can never punish. But that is to deny the teaching of Scripture from beginning to end. God punished Cain, and the ancient world in the flood; He punished the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; and He punished the children of Israel when they were recalcitrant. Then the whole teaching of the New Testament from the lips of Christ Himself is that there is to be a final judgment, that, finally, all the impenitent are going to a lake of fire, to the place where 'their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched'. If you do not accept this judicial principle, you must just say that there is a contradiction running right through not only the teaching of the Bible, but even through the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself; and that is an impossible position.*

We do and we must acknowledge this judicial element to God's dealings, therefore. But we also must be careful not to reason from that judicial element that God is not a God of love. The thing to bear in mind is that throughout the history of civilization God has been longsuffering to sinners. I'm reminded of God's dealings with Abraham back in Gen. 15. While Abraham was put into a deep sleep God communicated to him in a dream how the children of Israel would journey into Egypt and would be afflicted by that nation for 400 years. And following that time they would then come forth and so we read in Gen. 15:16 *But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites [is] not yet full.*

Do you see how longsuffering God was to those that sinned against Him? He endured their blasphemy – He put up with their false religions and their immorality. Indeed He did

more than put up with them – He blessed them. He made the sun to rise upon them. He sent rain for their crops and He sustained them even in their rebellion against Him. And God has been consistently longsuffering with sinners. Though they despise Him yet He blesses them. Though they reject His Son still they know the blessings of being in the land of the living. Though they treat Him with contempt and make the name of Christ a word to curse by – still He blesses them and holds out to them the provision that Christ has made for sinners to be saved.

And why? Why does God endure what He does? *The longsuffering of our Lord is salvation* Peter writes in 2Pet. 3:15. *The goodness of God is to lead sinners to repentance* Paul writes in Rom. 2:4.

The point that Christ is making in Mt. 5, then, is that the love of God must be foundational to our understanding of God's dealings with men. We must not abuse that truth by the error of universalism but neither should we abuse that truth by our understanding of God's sovereign decree. His decree is a great mystery that surpasses our understanding and is given to us, I believe, so that we learn to glory in Christ alone for our every spiritual blessing. If we misuse the judicial aspects of God's dealings with sinners then our theology has failed us and we in turn will fail to bear the family resemblance to God that we're called upon to bear.

If we truly and fully understand the character of our God then we will not count it unusual that the standard of love for the Kingdom of Heaven is to *love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father, which is in heaven.*

Indeed, when you think of Christ's sufferings and His atoning death and all that He endured by the hands of sinners then you'll come to say that this standard calls for nothing short of Christ-likeness. We see, then, the theological foundation for excelling love. May our knowledge of God motivate us to excel.

Consider with me next:

II. The Challenge to Excel in Love

You could say that the theological foundation for Christ's exhortation provides for us the positive motivation that we need for excelling in love. Christ also confronts His followers with a challenge that provides in a sense the negative incentive for pressing more.

What do ye more than others? – He asks in v. 47. What a heart searching question! What makes you stand out from anybody else? This is what our Savior is asking. How are you distinguishable from the world? You love those that love you? – well and good, Christ says in effect – you're no different than sinners. You greet your brethren? – that's well and good too but it doesn't make you stand out.

And so we find this question to be very heart searching especially in a day like ours when we find the prevalent propensity to shut ourselves off from the world. We know too

well the truth of Christ's prophetic statement that *because iniquity shall abound the love of many grows cold* (Mt. 24:12).

Our desire is to find refuge in Christ, our high tower and our shield. If only we can close in with Him and shut everything else out – then my love for Him and my devotion to Him will be steadfast and sure. We can keep close to our own loved ones and maybe even include the close knit circle of those we know at church. To which Christ says *What do ye more than others?*

I'm afraid that all too often we're hindered by fear or we're hindered by the desire to keep within our comfort zones. The monastic mindset that sounds so appealing loses sight of the way we're to function in this world. You remember what Christ said earlier in this sermon about the way Christians are supposed to function – *Ye are the salt of the earth* He says back in v. 13. *But if the salt have lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven.*

It is God's will that the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven be put on display. I believe this sermon shows us very plainly that Christ would have His followers be pro-active in this world – pro-active in the sense that we're endeavoring to win this world. Tempting as it may be to leave this world to itself and seek to shelter ourselves from it, we cannot overlook the fact that we, as Christians, do have a function to perform in this world – and that function is to be as salt and light.

And in order to accomplish this aim, our love for other Christians needs to be manifested before the world, and our love for lost sinners needs to be manifested also. The world needs to see that we are different because we excel in our devotion to Christ and we excel in our devotion toward those that need Christ.

I have said on repeated occasions that I believe the greatest challenge Christians face – and this is especially true for young Christians – is the challenge of how to be in the world without being of the world. According to Christ in His high priestly prayer in Jn. 17 we are not of the world. *They are not of the world* He says in v. 16 and yet He goes on to say in v. 18 *As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.*

And so the monastic mindset that says keep to yourself – go home at night and lock the doors and tremble in your insecurity and hide yourselves and hope that the world leaves you alone if you leave the world alone – that mindset has no place in the Christian's life. *What do ye more than others?* – Christ wants to know.

Do you find occasion to love your enemies and bless them that curse you and do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you? Does it occur to you that the reason for their spite and their cursing is traceable to the fact that they're lost? Have you forgotten what it is to be lost? Have you lost sight of what you once were and how the Lord drew you to Himself? This is really the key to meeting the

challenge. And this leads to my last point this morning. We've considered the theological foundation for excelling in love and now we've considered the challenge that Christ presents to excel in love. Would you consider finally:

III. The Means to Meeting This Challenge

The means to meeting this challenge is really quite simple. You need to remember what you were and then you need to reflect on what you are. *Love your enemies* Christ says in v. 44. Does it occur to you that you were once an enemy of God and that God loved you anyway? You walked in ways that were contrary to Him – and still He loved you. You shook a clenched fist in His face but He responded by sending His Son to die in your place.

You're called on to bless them that curse you in v. 44. Does it occur to you that you once cursed God? I can recall a time in my own life when I was as foul-mouthed as the worst of them – and still God blessed me. He allowed the sun to shine upon me. He provided for my life rather than casting me into hell. He protected me during the time of my foolish rebellion and spared me time and again from the consequences of that foolishness.

This is what should enable you to meet the challenge of excelling in love – especially during the times when that challenge seems hard. *Remember* Paul writes in Eph. 2 *that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ – can you recall that? 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.*

And how did God treat you during that time? Did He despise you and forsake you? Did He leave you to your own devices? Oh, He may have brought you to the end of yourself but even that was with the design of grace that you might seek Him and find salvation in His Son.

So we'll rise to the challenge by remembering what we were. We were enemies. We were cursers. We were among those that spitefully treated God. And once you recall what you were then call to mind what you are now. You are blessed. That's the beginning of this sermon and the foundation of this sermon. You were poor in spirit but now you're blessed. You were under conviction but now you're blessed with comfort. You were destitute of righteousness but now righteousness has been provided by the grace of God so now you're filled. You were once far from God – but now you see Him with the eye of faith. You once were defiled but your heart has been purged by the blood of Christ.

You've gone from strife to peace. You've gone from sorrow to joy. You've gone from death to life and you've gone from hell to heaven. You can't escape it – you're blessed of God. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* we proclaim with Paul in Eph. 1 *who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*

Bless the LORD, O my soul – we say with the Psalmist in Ps. 103 and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all they diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies.

To the degree that we believe we're blessed we will excel in love. We will find the enabling power to love our enemies, to bless those that curse us and to do good to those who spitefully use us. This is the way we strive for perfection. We strive to measure up to our blessed estate.

And if you know you're blessed – then it won't matter what the world hurls at you. You'll not only be equipped to handle it but you'll be equipped to overcome it by loving your enemies and doing good to those that spitefully use you.

I wonder then this morning – are you excelling in love? You should be. You're called upon to. Such excelling is in keeping with being conformed to the image of Christ? Do you stand out from the world – or do you only manage to function at the same level? *What do ye more than others?* – Christ wants to know.

And if you find yourself having to sadly bow your head and confess honestly before Christ that you barely stand out from the world at all and that you've failed to take up this challenge – then you need to take up the challenge by remembering what you were and what you are. I dare say that if you'll utilize even this upcoming Thanksgiving holiday to think on your blessings and to contrast those blessings to what you deserve from God – if you'll put the coming days to good spiritual use then you will find yourself rising to the challenge. A fire will be lit in your heart of devotion to Christ and that fire will be fanned to a flame as you call to mind the love of Christ to your soul.

May the Lord, then, stir your hearts. May the Lord empower you to remember so that you may indeed rise to the challenge of excelling in love.