

Loving Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

King of Kings! (Gospel of Matthew Series)

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All around Jesus were those walls and fences. He came for the very purpose of bursting those barriers, so that love-pure, warm, divine, infinite-would be able to flow straight down from the heart of God, hence from his own marvelous heart, into the hearts of men. His love overleaped all the boundaries of race, nationality, political party, age, or gender

WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN

Open your Bible to **Matthew 5:43-48**. We are continuing in a series entitled: “King of kings.” This morning we are talking about “Loving Your Enemies.” We continue in our study of the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus calls us to love our enemies. He came to break all the barriers down. He came to humble all people and unite those who used to be enemies in the love of the Cross.

Our Lord is introducing what Kingdom life is like. Jesus gives **six examples** that demonstrate a righteousness, a heart transformation that “exceeds the superficial righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.”

1. Kingdom citizens take **anger** seriously. We see even sinful anger and insults as murder.
2. We take **lust** seriously. They don’t even want to look with lust, as they, like our Lord, consider it adultery.
3. We take **marriage** and divorce seriously. We believe there is no reason for divorce.
4. We take our **word** seriously. Everything we say is like an oath.
5. We take **mercy** seriously. We don’t retaliate.
6. And today we’ll consider how we ought to take **love** seriously, specifically loving those who hate us.

The Most Expansive Teaching from Jesus on Love in the New Testament

We come now to the Sermon’s finale—the great commandment of love (Matthew 5:43–48). Here our Lord gives instruction for building an expansive love into our lives. It is the most concentrated expression of the Christian love ethic in personal relations found anywhere in the New Testament.

Reading of Holy Scripture

Matthew 5:43-47, “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 sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you,

what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This morning three things in this text that grab out attention. We’re going to see:

- The Teaching of Human, **Limited** Love (43)
- The Teaching of Divine, **Unlimited** Love (44-47)
- The Ultimate Goal: **Perfection** (48)

I. The Teaching of Human, **Limited** Love (5:43).

Matthew 5:43, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”

The “Separated Ones,” A Duty to Hate

The Pharisees were literally the “separated ones”. In order to be separated, they believe they not only had a right to hate their enemies, but it was their God given duty. To be righteous they had to hate. This meant that many of the scribes and Pharisees were proud, prejudiced, judgmental, spiteful, hateful, vengeful men who masqueraded as the custodians of God’s law and the spiritual leaders of Israel. To them, Jesus’ command to **love your enemies** must have seemed naive and foolish in the extreme. How did they get there?

The Teaching of Leviticus 19:18

That was the traditional teaching as the religious establishment understood it and as the man on the street was taught to think. But that is not what the Old Testament actually said. If you look closely at **verse 43**, you will note that the sole Old Testament quotation is from Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord,” a direct quotation from the Septuagint.

“Hate Your Enemy” Not in the Bible

The phrase, “and hate your enemy” is not found in the Old Testament. It was added. The Scribes and Pharisees added it. Calvin said they did this because they saw their “neighborhood” from man’s limited perspective. Had they seen it from God’s perspective, their neighborhood would have been the whole human race.

Think about it – our love is to mirror God’s love. **John 3:16**, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Twisting the Scriptures

Why did the Israelites make such an addition? It was a way to twist the Scriptures to give it a different meaning. They were convinced that the context of **Leviticus 19:18** confines the definition of neighbor to a **fellow Israelite**, and thus they would not tolerate any extension of the term to anyone else. Moreover, they felt that God’s direction of their historic relations with other peoples, such as his command to exterminate the Canaanites and the imprecatory Psalms, supported (even called for!) this hatred of others.

What they failed to take into account was the fact that those and similar commands, including the imprecatory Psalms, were judicial—never individual.

Gentile Dogs

There was a great hatred and racism of Jews toward Gentiles. To say they were at odds would be an understatement. The Jews said that anyone who wasn't a son of Abraham was a dog.

The Jews called the Gentiles "uncircumcised". That was a derisive name. That was like calling them trash. The Jews of 2,000 years ago actually taught that it wasn't lawful for them to help a Gentile mother at childbirth because that would be helping to bring another dog into the world. If a Jewish daughter or son married a Gentile the family held a funeral service. They never recognized their own children again. The children were in effect dead.

Human Love is Limited

Human love is limited. Throughout human history, people have said they love Jesus, but they have a double standard. Do we love only those who are familiar to us? Do we love only those cultures that are comfortable to us?

My Step-Mom

I remember after my mother died, my father remarried. We moved back to Chicago from Louisiana. It was hard, because our home, what was once a place of warmth and love, was now a museum. It seemed our step-mom resented the fact that after being married later in life, she now was a mom to two teenagers.

She treated us very badly. She was critical and unloving. I felt like an unwelcomed stranger in my own home. I remember asking God to help me to love her. God granted me that love.

God can give us a love that surpasses the world's love. Let's hear about it.

II. The Teaching of Divine, Unlimited Love (5:44-47).

Matthew 5:44-47, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

Old Testament on Loving Our Enemies

Love for our enemies was actually taught in the Old Testament. The Old Testament concept of neighbor included even personal enemies.

Exodus 23:4-5, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him.⁵ If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him."

Proverbs 25:21 (cf. Romans 12:20) says, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink."

A God-sized Love on the Cross for His Enemies

I believe that we must put the heart of the teaching in this way, for we miss the point of the verses unless we see that the standard is a love of which only God is capable.

We have not really seen the true extent of this divine love until we go beyond human love. God-love (*agape*) is an divine-size love that exists entirely apart from the possibility of being loved back. Where do we see this love if, indeed, it is God-love? Where is it demonstrated? The answer is that we see it only in Jesus Christ and in him preeminently at the cross.

Study the love of God, and you will find in the New Testament it is almost always connected to the Cross. There is hardly a verse in the New Testament that speaks of God's love without also speaking in the same context of the cross.

Christ Suffered for Vile, Repugnant Sinners

While we were yet God's enemies, He sent Christ to die for us! That's an *agape*, God-sized love! It is not merely the fact of Christ's suffering that makes God's love so wonderful. It is also the fact that he suffered for sinners, and this means for those who were in themselves naturally repugnant to him. Consider the testimony of God's love for you in the New Testament.

1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us."

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

1 John 4:10: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In each case the cross is made the measure of God's love. God loves unworthy, vile sinners. In any other situation they would be unacceptable and repugnant to Him, but through the love of Christ on the cross, we are accepted! We need to display that love to all our enemies.

Ron Brooks: the Gospel Changes Everything!

One of my mentors was at one time a pilot for UH-1 Helicopter in Vietnam. His duty was to defeat the enemy. But like so many soldiers converted in the war, Ron Brooks went back to them as a missionary and gave them the Gospel.

Corrie Ten Boom's "Enemy"

One story of a God-sized love for our enemies is told by Corrie Ten Boom. During WWII she and her sister Betsy had been sent to a **German prison camp**, because of the activity of helping Jews in Holland. Betsy died in the camp. Corrie lived, and after the war began to teach and speak everywhere of God's forgiveness for everyone. Shortly after the war God called Corrie to testify in Germany. Corrie told the people of the love, forgiveness and healing that God wanted to bring to Germany.

During one meeting a former Nazi prison officer approached Corrie. He had been one of the very guards who had abused and neglected her and her sister in prison. He did not recognize her, but she recognized him. He had become a Christian, and now asked Corrie if she could forgive him. Corrie was shocked! She now recognized him! Could she forgive him?

At first Corrie resisted, but then with the strength God gave her, she was able to hold her hand out to the man, and tell him: “For Christ’s sake, I forgive you!” After being obedient she sensed the filling of the Holy Spirit, and felt only great love for her former enemy.

Love is an Action, More than a Feeling

You may be here today, and you do not have it in you to love your enemy. If you read 1 Cor. 13, you will find that love is not primarily a feeling, but an action. C. S. Lewis was no theologian, but I think he got how we are to love when he said this:

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less...¹

Jesus calls us to a high standard. We are to love everyone, even our enemies. This is not something that we can do on our own. It is only something that we trust God will enable us to do. Why are we to love our enemies? Because God does, and we are his sons. Our heavenly Father is perfect in every way. His love is perfect, he gives grace to our enemies, causing the sun to shine on both the evil and good. We are to follow his example.

THREE CLARIFICATION ABOUT LOVE

(1) Love your enemies.

Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, Love your enemies.” Here is the most powerful teaching in Scripture about the meaning of love. The love that God commands of His people is love so great that it even embraces **enemies**.

When Jesus said, “I tell you, love your enemies,” he must have startled his audience, for he was saying something that probably never before had been said so succinctly, positively, and forcefully.

William Hendriksen puts it this way:

“All around Jesus were those walls and fences. He came for the very purpose of bursting those barriers, so that love-pure, warm, divine, infinite-would be able to flow straight down from the heart of God, hence from his own marvelous heart, into the hearts of men. His love overleaped all the boundaries of race, nationality, political party, age, or gender...²

Agape Love: The human tendency is to base love on the desirability of the object of our love. We love people who are attractive, hobbies that are enjoyable, a house or a car because it looks nice and pleases us, and so on. But true love is need-oriented. The Good Samaritan demonstrated great love because he sacrificed his own convenience, safety, and resources to meet another’s desperate need. It was the **Good Samaritan** who was despised, hated, and demeaned by his Jewish brother, but he reached out in love to lay his life down for his enemy.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana, revised edition 1964), 114.

² William Hendriksen. *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 313

Four Greek Words for Love: The Greek language has four different terms that are usually translated “love.”

- *Philia* is brotherly love and the love of friendship;
- *Storgē* is the love of family; and
- *Erōs* is desiring, romantic, sexual love.
- *Agapē*: But the love of which Jesus speaks here, and which is most spoken of in the New Testament, is *agapē*, the love that seeks and works to meet another’s highest welfare.³

Agape Involves Action: *Agapē* love *may* involve emotion but it *must* involve action. In Paul’s beautiful and powerful treatise on love in 1 Corinthians 13, all fifteen of the characteristics of love are given in verb form. Obviously love must involve attitude, because, like every form of righteousness, it begins in the heart. But it is best described and best testified by what it does.

Because of His love, we can love. “We love Him because He first loved us.” And “If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11–12).

(2) Pray for your enemies.

Matthew 5:44b, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Spurgeon said, *“Prayer is the forerunner of mercy,”* and that is perhaps the reason why Jesus mentions prayer here. Loving enemies is not natural to men and is sometimes difficult even for those who belong to God and have His love within them.

Jesus Prays for His Enemies: We see this most clearly on the cross. Jesus prays for His enemies on the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (**Luke 23:34**). When you pray for someone while they are persecuting you, you are assaulting the throne of God on their behalf: “God, help this person.” That is supernatural! If you do that, you are walking in the heavenlies with Jesus. One of the benefits of praying for our enemies is that it changes *us*. It is impossible to go on praying for another without loving him or her. Those for whom we truly pray will become objects of our conscious love.

Our persecutors may not always be unbelievers. Christians can cause other Christians great trouble, and the first step toward healing those broken relationships is also prayer. Whoever persecutes us, in whatever way and in whatever degree, should be on our prayer list. Talking to God about others can begin to knit the petitioner’s heart with the heart of God.

Chrysostom said that prayer is the very highest summit of self-control and that we have most brought our lives into conformity to God’s standards when we can pray for our persecutors.⁴

Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor who suffered and eventually was killed in Nazi Germany, wrote of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:44, “This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.”⁵

(3) Go beyond human love.

Matthew 5:45, “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”

³ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (344–345). Chicago: Moody Press.

⁴ MacArthur, 347.

⁵ *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller [2d rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1960], 166.

We have a tendency to love only what is comfortable and familiar to us. But God says we as His children ought to be loving like He loves. He loves His enemies.

To love our enemies and to pray for our persecutors shows that “we are sons of [our] Father who is in heaven.” The verb tense of “may be” indicates a once and for all established fact. God Himself is love, and the greatest evidence of our divine sonship through Jesus Christ is our love.

- “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).
- “God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16).
- In fact, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (v. 20).

Evidence that We are Sons

Loving as God loves does not *make* us **sons of the Father**, but gives evidence that we already are His children. When a life reflects God’s nature it proves that life now *possesses* His nature by the new birth.⁶

God’s Common Grace

Matthew 5:45b, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Those blessings are given without respect to merit or deserving. If they were, no one would receive them. In what theologians traditionally have called common grace, God is indiscriminate in His benevolence.⁷

Divine Love that Exceeds Human Love

Matthew 5:46-47, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

You say, but this love is not humanly possible. That’s right. Gentiles can love those that love them. You have to look at the Cross and imitate Jesus to love those who hate you and persecute you.

If the scribes and Pharisees were certain of any one thing it was that they were far better than everyone else. But Jesus again cuts through their blind hypocrisy and shows that their type of love is nothing more than the ordinary self-centered love that was common even to **tax-gatherers** and **Gentiles**-to whom the scribes and Pharisees thought they were most undeniably superior.

But the love of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said, was no better than the love of those whom they despised above all other people. **You love those who love you**, and that is **the same** type of love that **even the tax-gatherers and the Gentiles** exhibit. “Your righteousness,” He charged, “is therefore no better than theirs.”⁸

⁶ MacArthur, 348.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 349.

III. The Goal: Perfection (5:48).

Matthew 5:48, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

That perfection is also utterly impossible in man’s own power. To those who wonder how Jesus can demand the impossible, He later says, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). That which God demands, He provides the power to accomplish. Man’s own righteousness is possible, but is so imperfect that it is worthless; God’s righteousness is impossible for the very reason that it is perfect. But the impossible righteousness becomes possible for those who trust in Jesus Christ, because He gives them His righteousness.

That is precisely our Lord’s point in all these illustrations and in the whole sermon—to lead His audience to an overpowering sense of spiritual bankruptcy, to a “beatitude attitude” that shows them their need of a Savior, an enabler who alone can empower them to meet God’s standard of perfection.⁹

Conclusion

If there is one area where our commitment to Christianity is revealed, it is this one. There may come a day when we are persecuted for righteousness when our life is on the line. May God let us pour out our lives now for those who society or others might say are our enemies.

Tabiti Anyabwile once told the story of how he used to be into “black power” and how he saw through a lens of race and color. After coming to know Christ, he now sees people, not as his enemies, but as either being in Christ or not in Christ. The Christian has no enemies of his own, and even those that may hate him ought to be loved by the true child of God. Whatever hatred that might be in our hearts is rooted out by the love of Christ poured out at Calvary and in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Ibid., 350.