

You've Heard It Said...

In **Matthew 5:43-44**, Jesus clears up a major misconception that was prevalent in His day and has extended itself into our day as well. This attitude was due to a *perversion* of the Mosaic Law.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you...

When Jesus said, "You've heard...", He was referring to the then current teachings of the religious scholars who taught the egregious thinking that you should only love those who loved you. According to these religious leaders you should hate your enemies, wish death on them, be angry with them with a palpable anger. That was the error, but because it originated with religious leaders, it was often simply accepted by the average person.

But the Mosaic Law nowhere taught this, but instead, promoted something completely different, as we read in **Exodus 23:4-5** and **Leviticus 19:18**.

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. 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.

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

How much clearer could Moses have been? Moses said to *help* not *harm* even enemies.

You simply will not find any command to hate an enemy in the OT. It is simply not there. Possibly, many Jewish religious teachers got their idea of hating enemies from the imprecatory Psalms. The problem there is that the Psalmist clearly leaves things in God's hands and did not take vengeance for himself. Instead of hating one's enemies, the command is very clear, that we are to *love* (through our thoughts, actions and words), those who hate us and even persecute us.

Let's remember that this is coming from Jesus as a *correction* to the religious leaders of His day. Jesus *lived* it, even asking the Father to forgive those who crucified Him. His love extended to them in that way. Can we say we do that? I can't consistently, sadly.

Jesus not only reiterates the Mosaic Law but *amplifies* it by providing three ways in which love for enemies can be clearly shown to them:

1. bless those who curse you
2. do good to those who hate you
3. pray for those who spitefully use you

How can we do that if not from the *heart*? What is clearer to understand, yet supremely *difficult* to live than the above? For most of us (*myself* absolutely included), we don't know *HOW* to do

those things *from the heart*. We can make it *appear* outwardly that we love people, but what is actually in our hearts? That is what God sees "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Matthew 15:19)

I recently heard a group of pastors discussing Matthew 5:43-44 in sort of a round-table discussion. They promoted the concept that we must, as Christians, commit ourselves to God, praying that He will do in us what we are often powerless to do. I think there's a far better way.

Let's be honest. It is sometimes extremely difficult to get beyond terrible feelings we might harbor toward others whom we believe have wronged us or we simply don't like because of their politics, isn't it? We all have secret things in our heart that we prefer to keep hidden; a hateful feeling or attitude toward someone; a desire for God to "deal" with them and judge them; even sadly, a desire for God to remove them from this life. If you've never had that type of sentiment roaming around your heart, consider yourself perfect. As for me, I know it has been all too real too often.

When we give into the thought that we want to see our enemies "dealt" with, we are not following the commands of Moses that were *reiterated* and brought forward by Jesus. God's revealed moral code is to be kept by Christians. We are *not* exempt. But *how*?! Is this question keeping you awake at night?

As most grandparents, my wife and I take delight in being with our grandchildren and watching them play and grow and it is interesting that they grow automatically. What we *can* do is ensure they are fed with quality food and given ample opportunities to play and be creative in a safe environment. These are really indirect things that are done because their DNA is already programmed for them to grow *physically* over time.

A child who is properly cared for, fed well, engaged with and allowed to be creative will *grow* into a healthy individual as an indirect byproduct of that environment. Parents and grandparents don't start the day wondering, "How can I help them *physically* grow today?" We will instead often consider how to best *care* for them today. The growing takes care of itself.

The giving of proper food, playtime, love and care by parents simply creates the environment for that child to grow and develop into a healthy youngster and eventually an adult. The actions of the parents *indirectly* affect the *physical* growth of their children. Parents *never* have to "help" the child directly grow physically.

Planting a garden and harvesting what is planted is often an *indirect* result as well. I cannot force plants to grow after I've planted them and neither can you. The best we can do is create a good environment where plants can *succeed* in doing what they are programmed by God to do. Without water or needed sunlight, plants will not survive. If pests are not dealt with, plants will be destroyed. Everything we do regarding our plants' health is *indirect*. Even so, sometimes in spite of our best indirect efforts, plants do not grow or provide a good harvest.

In our area, peaches are well known. This year however, there was a late frost and many peach farmers lost up to half their crop. There was nothing they could do to change that. When we lived

in California, sometimes there would be late frosts that would destroy orange groves. Farmers would try to do what they could to mitigate the damage, but ultimately, Mother Nature won out.

My point is that we cannot force fruits and vegetables to grow. We can only provide indirect support that will hopefully provide the best environment for the plants to yield a good harvest. There are no guarantees.

I believe it's the same with *living* the Christian life. The things we should do are best done via *indirect* methods. In other words, you cannot force your heart to have the proper attitude toward those who hate you or persecute you. That proper attitude comes only from God's Spirit within us. Why does God mention the word "heart" nearly 1,000 times in Scripture? Because the condition of the heart is extremely important to God since it's the seat of our emotions. (We will deal with what Paul means when he talks about "*putting on the new man*," **2 Corinthians 5:17**, in a future article.)

We can *force* ourselves to act or speak a certain way *outwardly*, but *inwardly*, we may be harboring terrible feelings. While we can fool other people, we cannot fool God. Isn't it better to live the Christian life from the proper attitude that is resident *within* us, rather than simply going through the motions predicated on our own self-effort? Doesn't God want us to live the life He calls us to *from the heart*? I doubt anyone would disagree with that, but *how* to do that?

I believe getting there only comes through a healthy, growing fear of (offending) the Lord. I know, I know...I've said that before and I'm repeating myself, but I honestly believe this biblical truth bears repeating...*often*. I'm convinced we cannot live it *enough* in this life, but how to start?

The entire concept of living in the fear (of offending) the Lord is really an *indirect* method outlined in Scripture that provides the proper attitude and impetus to live the life God has called us to live. He doesn't want our self-effort. He wants us to submit to the fear of (offending) Him so that the living of His will becomes more natural. As we focus on cultivating the fear of (offending) the Lord, the results of that are proper *attitudes*, proper *thoughts* and proper *words* from the heart, that bring Him glory. In truth, I've had only *glimpses* of this in my life. It needs to become the *norm* for me. How about you?

I cannot force a plant to grow and produce a harvest. I cannot force my grandchildren to grow and mature. I believe this same concept applies to my life as a Christian. As I seek to grow in my fear (of offending) the Lord, the result will be a greater ability to actually live the way He wants me to live *from the heart*. No more will I be "pretending," but will find myself doing what is true and right more naturally.

We should be like Job, who *feared* the Lord. Out of that proper fear came the ability for Job to live the life that resulted in God calling Job "blameless" (*not* sinless). Do we crave a more natural way to live the Christian life without self-effort? Do you want streams of living water to flow up out of you (**John 7:38**)? Our self-effort keeps that from happening. There are too many examples in my life that prove that. Christians who learn to live this way will find they don't want to harbor resentment against perceived "enemies." Instead, they will actually want them to become *saved*, not *dead*.

The fear (of offending) the Lord should be our *direct* focus. As a result, we will find ourselves *thinking, speaking* and *doing* things that bring Him glory far more naturally, without self-effort. Our effort is in focusing on cultivating the fear of (offending) the Lord. We seek to grow in our fear (of offending) the Lord. That becomes our foremost desire and those things that glorify God - thinking, speaking and doing - become the natural result of that *inner* fear. We focus on the fear of (offending) the Lord. That fear creates right thinking and living.

When we become Christians, God implants within us the beginnings of the fear (of offending) the Lord. Our job is to cultivate that fear, helping it to grow. As it grows, we will automatically find ourselves living more in line with the Bible's truth for our lives. That is what brings Him glory because it will be a natural outflow of what is in our hearts. It will bubble up from within us instead of us trying to put it on from the outside as we do a coat.

I don't live this perfectly obviously. But I know of no better way to allow the new creation within us to take over our lives and personalities.