

Love Your Enemies
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Matthew 5:43-48
May 18, 2014

Take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 5. I'm going to be reading Matthew 5, from Verse 43 to Verse 48. This is a section of that part of the book of Matthew that we often refer to as '*The Sermon on the Mount*'.

Matthew 5:43-48 ~ "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 to rise on the evil and 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.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, I come to You this morning, we lift up this passage of Scripture to You, the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking to His disciples, and in turn speaking to us this morning. I pray, Father, for Your help, and Your strength, in preaching, and expositing the word of God. I pray as well for those who hear, that You would give them ears to hear, and the ability to take Your words and work it out in their lives, that we would apply the word of God in truth. And I pray this in Christ's name, Amen.

Today we are talking about the subject of enemies and the subject of love. As we begin this morning, I'd like you to consider the personal testimony of someone who experienced being an enemy, perhaps in the more formal sense that we think of in times of war with another nation. This is an excerpt from the testimony of Jacob DeShazer. He writes:

When I flew as a member of a bombing squadron, on a raid over enemy territory, my heart was filled with bitter hatred for the people of that nation. When our plane ran out of petrol, and the members of the crew of my plane had to parachute down into enemy-held territory, and were captured by the enemy, the bitterness of my heart against my captors, seemed more than I could bear. Taken to prison with

survivors of another of our planes, we were imprisoned and beaten, half-starved, terribly tortured, and denied by solitary confinement, even the comfort of association with one another. Three of my buddies were executed by a firing squad about six months after our capture, and 14 months later another one of them died of slow starvation.

My hatred for the enemy nearly drove me crazy. It was soon after the latter's death that I begin to ponder the cause of such hatred between members of the human race. I wondered what it was that made one person hate another person, or one people another people, and what made me hate them. My thoughts turned toward what I heard about Christianity changing hatred between human beings into brotherly love, and I was gripped with a strange longing to examine the Christian's Bible to see if I could find the secret. I begged my captors to get a Bible for me.

At last, in the month of May, 1944, a guard brought me the book, but told me I could have it only for 3 weeks. I eagerly began to read its pages. Chapter after chapter gripped my heart. In due time I came to the books of the prophets, and found that their every writing seemed focused on the divine redeemer from sin, one who was to be sent from Heaven to be born in the form of a human babe. On June 8, 1944, the words in Romans 10:9 stood out boldly before my eyes—

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

That very moment, God gave me grace to confess my sins to Him, and He forgave me all my sins, and saved me for Jesus' sake. I later found that His word again promises this so clearly in 1 John 1:9—

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

How my heart rejoiced in my newness of spiritual life, even though my body was suffering so terribly from physical beatings and lack of food. But suddenly, I discovered that God had given me new spiritual eyes, and that when I looked at the enemy officers and guards, who had starved and beaten my companions and me so cruelly, I found my bitter hatred for them changed to loving pity.

Now this is an amazing testimony for we haven't had the experience of being taken to prison by an enemy, to have been beaten, and to have been starved. At least I'm not aware that anyone here has, and so when we hear a testimony such as this, it seems very dramatic to us. We wonder how could we relate to a testimony like this, but today we are going to consider a passage of Scripture where Jesus commands us to do the very thing that this prisoner of war, having a new heart, having seen the Gospel of Jesus Christ come and transform him, from a bitter and angry man, hating his enemies, into one you could see through all of that, even the physical pain that he was enduring, and to have pity and compassion upon them, that this message of love for enemies is a message for us as well. For although we may not have those who have taken up arms against us, we live in a world where we have many people who don't love us, or at least don't love us the way that we think they should love us, don't appreciate us, and in some cases, are actually plotting and scheming against us, and desiring and longing to bring harm to us, or to bring ruin to our reputation.

Today as we look at this passage of Matthew 5, I want to break it down into three points. The title of the sermon is simple, it is 'Loving Your Enemies'. The first point is: 'Correcting Misunderstandings', looking at Verses 43 and 44. As we look at the teaching of Jesus, trying to correct a misunderstanding that people had about what God wanted them to think about their enemies. The second point is: 'Imitating Your Father', and that looks at Verse 45. The last point is: 'Accepting a Higher Calling', looking at the remaining verses, from Verse 46 through Verse 48. So let's jump in and look at the first point, 'Correcting Your Misunderstandings'.

1) Correcting Your Misunderstandings:

When we read here in Verse 43, "***You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'***", perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is this must be a direct quotation out of the Old Testament, and if we were going through '*The Sermon on the Mount*' in a consecutive order, you would see in Matthew 5, that there are a number of points that Jesus wants to make where He points to something that the people had heard, whether it be a quotation from the Old Testament, or something that had been modified, and then He takes it to a deeper and higher level. For instance, in Verse 27 of Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:27-28 ~ "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Another example of this would be in Verse 21:

Matthew 5:21-22 ~ “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ but ‘Whoever murder will be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court;

So there are a number of other cases here in Matthew 5. So we have to ask the question, what is being said here? Is Jesus in this verse? Verse 43? Is He correcting something that was said to the people in the Old Testament? Well let’s get into it a little bit farther. Part of this is true, and this is what was confusing about this, is because the first part of the statement, “You shall love your neighbor,” is something that is a direct quotation out of the Old Testament, for in Leviticus 19:18 we read:

Leviticus 19:18 ~ You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

The part that you don’t find spelled out in the Old Testament, that is quoted here, is the saying, is the quote here, “You should hate your enemy.” That is the part that had been joined together by the scribes and the Pharisees into a kind of saying, or perhaps interpretation of how they were taking the teaching of the Old Testament text in general, that this is how you should approach life. You should love your neighbor, and you should hate your enemy. We find in the Old Testament law that even for enemies there was some provision that was made, for in Exodus 23:4-5 we read:

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.

And to think about that in practical terms, about what that was saying to the people, it was saying that, it was identifying first of all that they were going to have to deal with the reality of enemies among them. It was a reality of life. It is a reality for us today, but that they were not allowed to leave that enemy, or allow that enemy to suffer harm in this way. That even if their property, their ox, or their donkey was going astray, they weren’t allowed to just sit there and go, “Hey, look over there. Isn’t this great? Look at that. I’m really glad. Lord, get him. Get him!

Hurt him! Take his animal, his property away from him.” But there was no allowance for that, that even your enemy, you were called to go and to help your enemy, practically speaking. And as well in the other illustration, that you are not to leave them in a precarious situation.

Now one of the challenges that we have to deal with when we consider the teaching of the Old Testament, and this idea of hating your enemy, is the aspects of the Old Testament where God commanded the people, such as in the entrance and conquest of the land of Canaan, where He commanded them to go, and to wipe out, and to destroy these nations, and to take possession of the land. How do we deal with that? Or perhaps even more difficult for us are those psalms, sometimes referred to as *'imprecatory psalms'*, where the psalmist is calling down curses upon his enemy. Is that not something that could be legitimately considered and thought of as hating your enemy? Is that what the Bible has told us to do? I think we can break this apart in two ways, to try to understand that in the Old Testament there was a judicial aspect of Israel with Israel's enemies, and then there was a personal aspect that was separate from that. And while, at some points in the Old Testament God had judicially called Israel to go and to take action against their enemies, that there was not an allowance for the individual to develop that sense of personal hatred for others.

Let's talk a little bit about the commandment in the Old Testament, loving your neighbor as yourself, and the saying that had been put before them, this misunderstanding. One of the things that is missing in the saying here in Verse 43 is of course that you are to love your neighbor as yourself, and so that is missing. Along with that is a misunderstanding with who your neighbor is. Now think back to the passage we read earlier, before the prayer, that very familiar story of the Good Samaritan, and the purpose in this story was to help define who that neighbor is. That if you are called to love your neighbor as yourself, that that neighbor actually includes enemies. Because in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, you had a list of people, three people that came by, and two of them would have been in the category of their brothers. The man who was hurt, his brother, a priest, and a Levite, and of course even more than that, these were religious leaders among the people, and so they should have demonstrated more love, more compassion, more care. But yet it wasn't those two men, instead it was a Samaritan who would have been looked upon as an enemy. So that Jesus defined in that point, and in that section, that loving your neighbor means, and includes, loving your enemy. The passage before this one in *'The Sermon on the Mount'*, deals with the issue of retaliation which is related to this, for I read to you in Verse 38 of Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:38-42 ~ “You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ 39 But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil; but if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

So in that passage, Jesus is dealing with retaliation. It is that natural desire that we have to give someone back tit for tat, and of course you may remember being a child yourself, what that’s like in a home where your brother does something to you, and so the obvious thing to do is to get him back. That is what you do, right? Then if you become a parent, then you have your own children, and you watch it take place among you. That that desire for retaliation and revenge is sitting there under the surface all the time. That if there is an action, there needs to be an equal and opposite reaction. And if we were looking at the text here before, that one of the purposes in the Old Testament of saying, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ was to limit retribution. That is, for one eye you can’t have two back, and for one tooth you can’t have a whole mouthful. If you think about it like that, it was a way of limiting that retribution that was there.

But Jesus was calling the people, and calling us in that, that we are not to take retaliation. We are not to lift up our rights, and our sense of justice, and so if that is the case, then what is He doing in this passage? He is taking us to the next level because naturally speaking, many of us can be brought to a point where we are trained and conditioned to not respond in revenge and retaliation. We can be conditioned to that point. For instance, with children, whether they have it in their hearts to do good to their brother or sister, you can’t let them just have it out and do what they want. They have to be brought to a point where there is an understanding of a need for obedience, and a means of treating people. But you can’t go inside of their hearts, you alone, and change them to have a desire to love. You can teach them that way, lead by example, and do many other things, but what Jesus is calling here is not just to cease from retaliation and revenge, but He is talking about something that is far greater. He is saying that not only do you cease from retaliation, but you go to the next step, to a higher level, and actually says, “You love your enemies. You love them with a biblical love, and all that it means.”

Throughout Scripture we know that biblical love is not just a feeling that we have for someone. If one of the captors in the opening illustration had come to Jacob DeShazer after they had beaten him, after he was starving, and said to him, looked

him in the face and said, “Do you like me?” What kind of ridiculous question is that? Of course you don’t like a person who is mistreating you, and beating you, and harming you, and doing ill to you, but the biblical command here is to love them, and that love demonstrates itself in actions, in obedience to God and His command, and into loving actions, demonstrating that hard attitude towards other people.

So today an application from this point, I would make it clear that none of us have any biblical basis for hating our enemies with a personal vendetta or hatred. Now that seems obvious at one point, but when you have someone who is opposing you, an opposition, in your face, and you feel that they are taking their two fingers, and in some way putting them right into your eyes. Whether it’s your co-worker, whether it is a family member, whether it is a neighbor, whether it is someone else who is knifing you behind your back, and doing all sorts of evil to you, that is the point where what rises up first is, “I need to get him back, and I have a right to be mad at this person, and to hate this person. There is no way that I’m going to show weakness by actually loving them, and demonstrating that love through actions to this person.”

We can consider the teaching of Romans 12 which helps to expand upon how this works itself out in our lives. For we read there in Verse 14:

Romans 12:14-16 ~ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.

And then we have it:

Romans 12:17-18 ~ Repay no one evil for evil to anyone, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

And then down to Verse 20:

Romans 12:20-21 ~ “TO THE CONTRARY, IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM SOMETHING TO DRINK; FOR BY SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

You see the great opportunity that you have with those who oppose you, those who are your enemies in some way shape or form in this life right now? The opportunity is to do that which is completely unnatural, and which cannot be explained except for the grace of God working in your life. To work in a way that is so contrary to nature, that it would shock some people, to say, “Why is he being nice to me?” and perhaps a person would go, the only conclusion they can reach is, “He must be trying to manipulate me in some way.” Instead, to do it out of a heart of love, and desire that they ultimately would come to know the Lord.

So I ask you today, do you love your enemies? Do you pray for those who persecute you? Can you bring yourself to the point to actually take one loving action towards a person who is in opposition to you? I ask you today if this is an area that you are struggling with? And in any particular situation that you cry out to the Lord and ask Him for His grace, and for the power of the Holy Spirit to come in, for Him to open your eyes, and to see the great glory that He will receive, as His glory is made manifest in your life, by forgiving, and by loving, and by doing what is contrary to your nature. Let’s move on to our second point, *‘Imitating Your Father’*.

2) Imitating Your Father:

So this great command that Jesus gives to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, is now backed up with a calling that we would imitate our Father. For we read:

Matthew 5:45 ~ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Many of you have the experience in your own family of having a particular likeness with one of your parents. I can remember several years ago, I went to vacation to St. Augustine, and I visited the church where my father grew up. I went into a Sunday school class that had mixed-aged adults. I walked into the class and I’ve got Joy with me. We come in to sit down and there’s an older lady there, and she doesn’t know who I am, and she looks across the room, and she looks at my face, and she says, “You’re Mark Gaines’ son, aren’t you?” And you marvel at these things because there is no previous information, but just one look at the face, the likeness was close enough to be able to tell that I was the son of my father.

So here we find out that this command to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us is actually something that would be a reflection of our heavenly Father, for we read here that He makes His Son rise on the evil and on the good, that the Lord Himself demonstrates His own kindness to all people and all creatures. Consider today as you perhaps drove to church and the rain was falling down upon you, that out there in the field of agriculture that there are those who are farming and who are providing crops, growing crops for us, and there are those out there that do not love God, and they do not serve Him, and they have not bowed the knee to Jesus Christ. And there are some of them who don't want to have anything to do with the Lord, and yet that rain fell on their fields and it blessed them in their efforts in their labor.

Right next to them is another man who is a believer in Jesus Christ, and serves Him faithfully, and is worshiping Him this morning in some congregation, and the rain fell on his field too. So think about in this world all of those people who have no relationship with God, no desire to worship Him, to serve Him, or to love Him, and yet they experience many of the same natural or general blessings that we enjoy together. There's an emphasis here in this verse if you see it as speaking of the Father's work, that it is God. He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good. His sun, that it's God's creation, and here is God blessing the creation in a general fashion

Several weeks ago as we were starting the doctrinal class in Sunday School, we were talking about the aspect of revelation, and how God in His general revelation has made something of His character and His nature known to all of mankind, but that there's a more particular, special revelation that He has given to us in His word in communications to us. We find here, I believe, in looking at the Father's actions towards His creation, that we find that He demonstrates both a general love to all, but yet of course a particular love to His elect, His people. Consider the general love first:

Psalm 145:14-16 ~ The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. 16 You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

In Acts 14 as Paul is preaching, he says:

Acts 14:17 ~ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

So here we have this evidence of God’s general love, His common grace, as it’s often called, to all people. But I want to distinguish that from the love that He particularly has for those who are His own. Consider the wonderful love displayed in Romans 8:35-37.

Romans 8:35-37 ~ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

That is a special love that God has for us, those who are in Jesus Christ, His people. Or consider 1 John 4:9-10.

1 John 4:9-10 ~ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

So there is ample evidence that there is a special love that He has for His people, and yet here in our passage in Matthew 5, we are focusing on that more general love, recognizing that to everyone God has expressed some aspect of goodness.

So today again as you think upon your enemies and those who aren’t loving you, or not loving you the way that you would want them to, or who are against you, or making your life difficult in some way or another, I ask you are you following in your Father’s footsteps? When people look at you and your attitudes, and in your speech, and in your actions towards other people that don’t love you, do they see a reflection of the Father who is in Heaven, or do they see a reflection of just every other man and woman on the face of this earth, that you’re acting like them?

Consider first the comparison between the Heavenly Father, the love and goodness that He shows to all mankind, and for those who are the recipients. Here is God, holy and righteous, perfect in all His ways, without sin, set apart from all that has been made, and here are people, rebels, shaking their fist at Him, suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, and yet they experience the ability to eat, and to drink, to

experience many good things in life that we all experience—the joys of relationships and family, and entering into this world, and engaging with our skills and gifts. So if God, being perfect in all His ways, can show some measure of kindness and goodness to these people who are rebelling and are opposed to Him, can we not who are not perfect in all our attributes and nature, and who sometimes develop enemies not because we're Christians, not because we're citizens of the United States of America, but we develop an enemy sometimes partly because of our sin, partly because of the words that come out of our mouth that have not been sanctified, because of the actions that have taken place, not because we're being truly loving, but because we've led our flesh to control us.

So we need to be humble and recognize that sometimes we have a part in these things. And then as we look down on those to whom we should show goodness and kindness, we look at them and sometimes we elevate what they have done to us and have made them so that for every little, petty offense against us, we now think of them as these captors who are beating and starving their prisoners, because they do something small to us.

Today I would call you to see the opportunity that you have to witness for Jesus Christ by being like Him, by acting according to His ways and His example, the one who could cry out upon the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," to follow your Master instead of following the pattern and the course of the world that is around you. So let's move now to our third point:

3) Accepting a Higher Calling:

So the command that we love our enemies and that we pray for those who persecute us is buttressed up with an argument that we need to follow the example of our Heavenly Father. The next argument that's given to us is to show us that if we don't love our enemies and we actually only love those who are like us or who love us back, that actually we've accepted a very low calling and station in this life. For we read in the text:

Matthew 5:43-48 ~ 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.

There's a low standard in this world that sometimes we fall into, and it's a low standard, or statement, or motto that we would never say with our mouths, but it's this: *Do unto others as they have done unto us*. Now, think about that for a minute. We wouldn't say that, because we know it's not biblical, but sometimes practically it works itself out like that, does it not? When we go to people, and we look at a person, and we consider how we're going to act towards them, treat them, talk to them, think about them, we can think, "How has this person treated me?" And when we find that person who respects us and who holds us in high esteem, that person who treats us well, who wants to include us in their group, we say, "You know, I really like this person. This is a good person for me," and we kind of bring them on our team, saying, "This is somebody who's on my team," and then we look out at others and we say, "Well, this person doesn't respect me so much, hasn't always done kind of good in the way I would want, and so I'm not really sure that that person is kind of on my team, and so they're over here. So what I need to do is show love to these people over here that respect me and love me in all these ways."

So what we can form sometimes is what I'll call a mutual admiration society, that is, we get together with those that are like us, similar interests, similar desires, I like you, I admire you, I appreciate you, you appreciate me, let's get together. We won't say anything that really confronts each other. We won't even point out our weaknesses or consider that. We'll just admire each other, and we'll enjoy each other's company, and in doing so get some kind of sense in our minds that we're actually really loving these people. He says here that if we do this, that if we love those who love us, that if we greet only our brothers—and consider that in the original setting, the brothers may have been in particular those who were Jews among them, and perhaps even more closely those who were closely connected with them, but greeting our brothers could be even limiting our love to our fellow Christians.

Well, of course we're called to love each other in the body of Christ, but if we limit it to only loving those of our social class, those people who live in our neighborhood, our level of income, our style of life, and of course those who sometimes are of our same race or ethnicity, and of course what a shame that has been when there has been so much hatred and strife of one people against another. It's happened in the US, and it's happened all over the world, and it's happening today as you study the world news, the hatred of one race or people for another. Greeting only our brothers could mean those who have our same interests, or those who have our same background, or even more so our personalities.

“Hey, that’s a really good person over there because they’re just like me, and we can get together and just be like each other, and we can talk and have a great time together.” Well, so be it. We’re going to naturally be drawn to some people for all of these reasons, and of course we need to show love there, but what Jesus says is that if you only love these people, and you don’t love your enemies, and you don’t pray for those who persecute you, here’s what you’re like. You’re like a tax collector. Some of you might say, “There it is! It’s the biblical basis for understanding how we’re supposed to feel about tax collectors, these really low people in this world.” Of course, you can read Romans 13 later today and get a refresher on God’s role in the government as His ministers and agents in our lives. But in particular here, the tax collectors were so hated by the people because they were typically Jewish men who had contracted with the Roman government for a set fee, and so they owed the Romans a certain amount, but they had the freedom to collect as much as they could from the people.

Now, think about this. If you’re a Jew and you live there, and the Romans are lording it over you and controlling your nation, and one of your own brothers goes and says, “I’m going to sell my people out for my own profit, and I’m going to use my own brothers, my people, to make my life better and to elevate myself,” and so they were hated. He also mentions that we would be like Gentiles, and some of you say, “Well, I am a Gentile.” But in this case, they were those who were considered as unclean dogs, and for hundreds of years, the people of Israel had experienced subjugation and rule by succession of Gentile nations, including in the worst case, Antiochus Epiphanes and the horrible way that he desecrated the temple with his actions.

So we need to reflect on a minute that if we don’t go to the next level in what Jesus is calling us, we’re not really any better than these people. We’re not acting in a way that is worthy of the Gospel. We are just acting in a way like everyone else in this world by nature. So Jesus is giving us a high calling at this point to go beyond the low level to the highest. So what are the things that keep us from going on to the high level? How does sin work upon our lives? Well, of course there’s that desire for revenge and retribution that we’ve mentioned before, that if I can just get a pound of flesh out of my enemy, that I’ll be satisfied, that justice has taken place. Sometimes there is even a legitimate sense of a need for justice to be done for wrongdoing, because God is a just God, and there is a need for justice to take place.

In some cases, there is an unwillingness simply to deny ourselves and to take up our cross, and to follow Jesus Christ, that is, simply put, we know that we need to do it but we say, “I just won’t do it, Lord, I can’t do it. I will not love this person, because I don’t want them to see me as weak. If I get them back and I respond, or if I hold back my affections, if I even don’t retaliate but I hold back, in some ways I maintain my ground.” But when you step over that line and you actually take a loving action to someone else who is taking no loving actions to you, you now have crossed the line and you’re trusting the Lord. “Lord, if I deny myself, humanly speaking, and take up my cross and follow You, that You will be pleased and glory will be brought to Your Name, and the Gospel will be magnified.” There’s also a mention here of rewards. We can consider here that often times we do not think about the idea of heavenly rewards. We of course don’t serve Christ because we’re promised something in return—a tit for tat, “Lord, I’ll give to You financially, or my time, or my service, or something else, and You’re going to give me something in return, but the Bible does speak about rewards and speaks of God as a God who does reward us.

Hebrews 11:6 ~ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

That this is something that we’re promised, that when we give up our earthly rewards, our earthly opportunities and serve Christ, that there’s a promise that there is a heavenly future that is to come. So today I ask you regarding the enemies that you encounter in your life, which path are you pursuing? Are you pursuing the low calling to love those who love you? Have you formed in your life a mutual admiration society of those that you express loving actions and words and deeds towards, and yet there’s another group of people over here that aren’t part of that society, that you refrain from doing so because they aren’t in your group? Does an honest evaluation of your life indicate that loving words, actions, and attitudes apply to those who affirm you, appreciate you, and have shown you kindness? And in particular, I ask you, is there someone today who has a name, and a face, and a location in this world, who is resisting you in some way that you feel is critical of you, and even taking actions that cause you due stress and difficulty?

Now, I know that some of you have had to deal in life in the past with some who have hurt you greatly and sinned against you in large ways. Some of you today are currently engaged in relationships and situations with people who you feel are not working for your good but for your harm, and so for you, it is the hardest to put this truth into action, but at the same time, this is the greatest opportunity for you

to honor Christ and to take the high road, and to pray each day for His grace, for His help to do so. If we as a body of believers love only those who love us and are like us, then we act no differently from the world and will not reflect the personal, intimate love that God has shown us by reaching down to us while we're His enemies, saving us from our sins and giving us peace in our relationship with Him.

The last verse of this passage is one that can seem perhaps a little troubling to us, for we are called and told that we must therefore be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect:

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

Now, that's a high calling, to be perfect. Now, some throw up their arms and say, "I can't do it, so why do I even try? It's too hard." The word *perfect* here is derived from the word for being complete, perfect, or mature. It's the idea here that we are called to be of mind and character, one who has reached the proper height in virtue in comparison with the Lord. But what we're called to here is no different if you consider the teaching of 1 Peter as it looks back to the Lord's character:

1 Peter 1:15 ~ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

This is the level that we are called to, to reflect our heavenly Father. This is not a teaching of Christian perfectionism, that you're supposed to go through some crisis experience where you have a crisis of faith and you fail, and you find out that you can strive anymore, and then all of a sudden you're bumped up to a place of entire sanctification, or a level of holiness. But rather it's a reminder to us of our need to depend on the Lord, to depend on Him because we need to be obtaining, stretching, and reaching to attain the highest goal that is out there, to be perfect, complete, mature, just as our Heavenly Father is in all these things.

So in conclusion today, I would call you to simply love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. I would call you today to look upon the opportunity you have to reflect your Father who is in Heaven, to examine the Scriptures and to see all the aspects and examples throughout the Old and the New Testament of how He has showed kindness and goodness to people that have not responded back to Him, those who have not reciprocated to Him.

It is so easy sometimes to think that we love somebody, and then the point that we find out that we don't love them is the point where they don't reciprocate back with kindness and appreciation, but they push back and they fight back against us. Then at that point it reveals to us whether in our heart we are going to keep pressing on in those loving actions or we're going to turn around and say, "Okay, well if you're going to act like that, well then I've got another plan and another strategy that I have, and that's the one that in my flesh I developed, and it's called, "I can take on anyone and get back at them."

Today I would call you to look to the Lord, and today if you are saying to yourself, "You know, I don't love my enemies and I don't have any desire to love my enemies. This is ridiculous," then I would call you to look to Jesus Christ, the One who was mistreated, who was perfect, who was accused, who was mocked and ridiculed, and who ultimately was crucified for the sins of His people. Today if you don't have any desire to love those who don't love you, then I would call you to turn from your sin, to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Will today you turn from your sin and love the God who has reached down to His enemies in love?

Let's close in prayer...

Father, I come before You this day and I thank You for the word of God that is living and active, that is sharper than a double-edged sword, penetrating even to dividing soul and spirit, and joints from marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. Father, we pray today that You might help us in this teaching that is so simple in some ways, but yet so difficult to put into practice, and Father, that through this, that You would make the body of Christ here at Providence to shine even more brightly in this twisted and crooked world and generation that You have called us to live in, and I ask this in Christ's Name, Amen.

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