



Loving Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

GraceLife: September 17, 2006

© 2006 by Don Green. All rights reserved.

A few weeks ago, at the height of the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, I had a conversation that kind of seared itself in to my conscience. I was a political science major in my undergraduate days at Indiana University, and so I've always had a little bit of interest in following the world events and that kind of thing that stuck with me through the years. And I was tracking the Lebanon and Israel conflict pretty closely and making my own uninformed judgments about what Israel needed to do to strengthen their position in that conflict. And the news was of course fast and furious in those days about that conflict.

So I came to church one Sunday thinking about these things and thinking about what Israel needed to do to deal with its enemies. And after the elders' prayer meeting on Sunday morning, I was walking with one of the other elders at Grace and we were talking about the conflict. He had some ministry over there in Lebanon that he was dealing with, and I said something like, "You know, Israel has just got to beef up what they are doing and they have got to go after these guys more strongly and commit more forces to it" – like I know anything about military strategy, right? (Laughter) Yak, yak, yak.

But that's the way I was thinking about this conflict. And this elder, whose name I'll leave out of discussion, looked at me and kind of nodded and agreed with me and said, "But you know, I just think about all of the suffering that those people who are over there who don't know Christ are going through." You know, I mean, that's a godly way to look at it. And so I said, "Yeah, that was the next thing I was going to say." (Laughter) Actually it wasn't, but it stuck with me. He had the right perspective – that a Christian has to look at conflict through different eyes.

Yes, the government has to do what it has to do to defend its borders and that's good and biblical and right. But as individual Christians, we look at those things differently and we see our enemies through different eyes. And that applies not only on a world-wide basis, on a macro scale as we watch Islam and watch what their murderous guys are doing, but it also applies on a personal level when we have our own conflict with people that are in our lives and even within our family.

Our passage this morning gives us very clear instruction from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ on exactly what we are to do and how we are to think about those kinds of things. I invite you to turn to Matthew chapter 5 with me, beginning in verse 43. That's where

we're going to allow the Lord speak to us through His word this morning. Matthew 5:43 where Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor" and "hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is a very challenging section of scripture. Not challenging because there are so many difficult interpretive issues in it; it is because it is personally challenging. It goes to the very heart and core of who you are and how you deal with people and how committed you are to reflecting the nature of your heavenly Father in every daily interaction that you have.

Here in this passage, Jesus is speaking to His disciples and He is closing out this section that we have been looking at for several weeks, going from verse 21 to 48. And what we have said about that passage, that section of scripture, is that Jesus is giving a series of six illustrations, showing His disciples how their daily righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if they wished to enter the kingdom of heaven. Look at chapter 5:20 – this was kind of the cornerstone text to everything that followed in Matthew 5. Jesus said:

I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And then He goes on and gives these six illustrations and He is explaining to them one by one, prevailing teaching that the Pharisees were giving at the time that Jesus was teaching back in the first century. He showed why the Pharisees' teaching was wrong and unbiblical even though they tried to attach a few scripture verses to it in the process. And then He goes on and explains what true righteousness looks like. Don't miss, beloved, that He says that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven at all.

And the kind of righteousness that Jesus is describing here naturally flows out of someone who has been truly born again. This is the mark of the life of the new creation; this is the fruit of repentance. And someone who doesn't in some measure have this kind of direction in his spiritual life is someone who is not a Christian at all, because true conversion, true new birth, changes you into somebody else and you live a life that is distinct and different from the world. That's why Jesus could say in chapter 5:13:

You are the salt of the earth...

Verse 14:

You are the light of the world...

Verse 16:

Let your life shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

The Christian has to be different, noticeably distinct. And the way that your distinctive character shows is in the way that you live your life and the way that you cultivate inner righteousness in your heart. Someone who does not do that, someone who is not concerned about that, someone who does not move in that direction in their life, is someone who is not a Christian because their righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees.

I have said many times, I'll say it once more, that we are not describing here works and things that we do in order to become a Christian. No, you put your faith in Christ, He changes you in to a new creation, and then this new life flows from it. And it is the life that in part manifests itself with this kind of ethics. It is no different, beloved, as we come to this passage in verses 43-48 about loving your enemies, about having a merciful disposition toward those that are opposed to you.

Now, notice this: this is not the first time nor will it be the last time that Jesus raises this whole matter in this sermon. Let me just remind you of some passages that we have looked at, long ago even for some of them. But in chapter 5:9 in the midst of the beatitudes Jesus said:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

And then He goes on in verse 10 and talks about the measure of persecution that will come, and He says:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

And how do you respond when that kind of opposition comes? Verse 11:

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

You're going about, you're living your life, you're pursuing the righteousness which God requires from you, and this kind of evil, wicked opposition comes. People say false things about you; people do wicked things to you. What does Jesus say about that? He says:

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The true Christian understands that this comes with the territory: “They opposed Christ; they persecuted Christ; they crucified Him. Okay, I’m going to follow Him, I’m going to get the same kind of treatment – it’s not that big of a deal. I’m going to respond to that like Jesus did.” This is the way a Christian looks at it.

Last week we looked at verses 38-42, where Jesus said, “Do not resist an evil person.” In verse 40 He says:

*If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.
Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.*

And on it goes. We said the Christian is divorced from this idea of retaliation, of striking back, of returning evil for evil: “You hurt me, I’ll hurt you. At the very least, I’ll ignore you, and you’ll know from my silence that I’m not happy with you.” Jesus says, “You can’t live that way if you are a Christian – that is forbidden. By My direct command, by My direct authority as the Lord of the universe, you as My disciple cannot live that way. You cannot tolerate those grudges; you cannot nurse that kind of bitterness in your heart.”

In Matthew 6:12 as He sets forth the elements of true prayer, He brings this out again. Going to the very core, the very nerve center, of your relationship with God is that attitude of mercy and forgiveness. Matthew 6:12 He says this is how you pray:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

“As we have forgiven those who have sinned against us – O God, forgive me in the same manner, the same measure.” And so as you think about the people that have wronged you – maybe this week, maybe over the course of your life – the question that you have to ask yourself is: “How much bitterness do I want to cling to? How angry do I want to stay about this when the measure of God’s forgiveness toward me for my sins against Him is somehow going to be measured by how I forgive others?”

Look at Matthew 6:14, Jesus says:

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Wow, that puts us in a corner, if you will. Let me put it this way: it only puts you in a corner if you are unwilling to yield those grudges and bitteresses. If you want to hold on to them, then you are in a really bad position because the Lord says “You can’t follow Me like that, that doesn’t work, I don’t take disciples like that. That’s not how I dealt

with you as the Lord and Savior,” He would say. “I forgave you your transgressions; you can’t hold on to the transgressions that others have committed against you – it doesn’t work that way.”

And so we see the vastness of the mercy that God has showered upon us, full, unconditional forgiveness when you put your faith in Christ and He says, you go and do likewise – wow. You know what? That’s only right for you to be that way. If you are going to enjoy the blessings of forgiveness from God on the one hand, you have to turn around and extend it to the person who has wronged you as well – it’s a necessity, it’s a compulsion. The true Christian looks at that and says, “Yes, of course, that’s the way it should be.”

Well, when Jesus stepped in to first century Jewish life, the prevailing religious teachers were not approaching it that way at all. By way of introduction, I need to give you how the Pharisees had distorted this command to love your neighbor, like they had distorted the rest of the scriptures to their own destruction.

1. The Pharisees’ Distortion of Biblical Love

In 5:43, look at what it says there, as we move in to our text now:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor” and “hate your enemy.”

Notice that “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR” is in all caps in most of your versions – it’s a direct quote from the Old Testament. But this other part, “and hate your enemy,” is not in caps, it’s because it doesn’t appear anywhere in the Old Testament. Here’s what’s going on here. Jesus is quoting the prevailing teaching of the Pharisees on this point and the prevailing teaching of the Pharisees on this point started with the Old Testament law in Leviticus 19:18, which says this – even in the Mosaic Law it said:

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 central command there: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What did the Pharisees do with that? They twisted it, they perverted it to serve their own purposes, and here is what they did: They put the emphasis of that passage in the wrong place. They said the main thing for you to do was to love your neighbor. “Love your neighbor,” they said. God said to Moses, “Love your neighbor,” and from that, they extrapolated that therefore you should hate your enemy – what a twisted perversion of the scriptures! They turned the command to love into a command to hate. They turned the command to love your neighbor into an excuse to carry out vengeance on their personal enemies. It was another total perversion of the scriptures, just like the other five that Jesus had exposed in the rest of Matthew chapter 5.

Now, if a Pharisee was here on the stage with me, he would be saying, “Wait a minute, there was a reason we said that.” Let me just tell you briefly what they would say. The Pharisees would say it’s not just the inverse implication of that command, but you have to remember that God commanded the nation of Israel to wage war on the surrounding nations in the Old Testament: “We went to war with enemies. And also, you should remember that there are these things called the imprecatory psalms where people call out God’s judgment on enemies.” And that kind of reasoning gave a certain plausibility to the argument.

But even on Old Testament grounds – and this is just setting up what you need to hear this morning, beloved, so stay with me – even on Old Testament grounds, the Pharisees were missing the point completely. The Pharisees had taken this teaching and said, “This gives me justification for carrying out vengeance on my personal enemies. I’m going to strike them back! Don’t cross me – I’m a Pharisee!” But even on Old Testament grounds, they were wrong. In the wars and in the imprecatory psalms, Israel was acting – get this – as an instrument of God’s judgment against God’s enemies; it was *not* a matter of personal dispute, and I want you to see this. Turn to Psalm 139 with me for a moment. Psalm 139 beginning in verse 19 – this is a psalm of David, and notice how he prays and pay close attention to what he says – he says:

O that you would slay the wicked, O God. Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. For they speak against You wickedly, and Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies.

What he is saying here is, “God, I’m going to take up the cause against Your enemies, those who have declared war against you.” And David in this psalm and in the other imprecatory psalms, you will see that they are speaking on God’s behalf against the enemies of God. They are not talking about a personal enemy. They are so closely identifying themselves with God, the God of their covenant, that they are saying, “I’m so closely identified with You that if anyone is an enemy of You, he is an enemy of me.” That is not what the Pharisees were saying and what they were doing with this.

And let me take you to something else that proves this: On a personal level, when David was personally insulted, his reaction was totally different. For example, in 2 Samuel 16, there was a man who cursed David when he was with servants. And David’s servants wanted to go out and cut his head off – “Don’t talk to my master that way. I’m going to cut your head off.” And David stopped them and said, “No, I don’t want you to do that.” David refused the opportunity to seek his own vengeance. With these words in 2 Samuel 16:11-12, when David was personally being cursed and he had servants willing to carry out vengeance, here’s what David said:

Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him. Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day.

He held back from personal vengeance; he held back when it was a personal insult. So when David was personally assaulted and afflicted by men, he responded with patience and forbearance and committed his cause to the Lord; he refused to take his own vengeance. So the Pharisees had it all wrong; they took those things and said, “This would justify me as I go out and wreak havoc on those who have wronged me.” Totally, totally wrong – wrong in their actions, wrong in their attitudes, wrong in their heart. They were using the scriptures to justify their sin – how sick is that! God forbid that any one of us in this room would be found doing a similar thing.

Now all of this, beloved, has very searching implications for every one of you. It goes to the very depth of your character, to the very nerve center of who you are, to your internal mission control center, because Jesus – this one whom most of you call Lord, this One to whom you have pledged your allegiance and devotion, this One to whom you owe your every breath, this One to whom you owe your eternal destiny, this One who stands over all of us with unparalleled authority and unparalleled greatness and perfect sinlessness and absolute moral authority – picks up this matter of loving your enemies and makes it the capstone to His entire argument about how your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if you wish to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And so, as we go through this, you need to be thinking about that person in your life who most provokes you, that person in your life who has harmed you in some way, because that person becomes a searching test of the quality of your personal righteousness as you live out your salvation in the presence of the holy God. So in the remainder of our time this morning, I want to ask and answer two questions that arise from this passage that every one of us has to deal with, every one of us has to answer. First question:

2. How Should You Love Your Enemies?

How should you love them? In what manner do we express this kind of love that Jesus is commanding? Look at verse 44, where Jesus says:

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Now, an enemy is someone who is hateful or hostile to you, someone who designs or actually brings harm upon you, someone who is antagonistic towards you, someone who in one manner or another gets in your face. Maybe on a macro scale, the enemy is the threat of Islamic fundamentalists who want to butcher anyone who criticizes Mohammed. And I can't help but think that in the years to come, this is going to become a more pressing issue to us here in the States – how we respond to them. Right now it is still overseas; it is still “out there.” But we have to be prepared for it to become closer to us – what do we do? Maybe on a micro scale in daily life, it is simply someone who has hurt you or irritated you – they get in your space one way or another – you know who I'm talking about.

Here's what you have got to come to grips with: the disciples of Jesus Christ have very clear commands from their Commander, very clear instruction from Jesus Himself, on

how we are to respond to this person – Jesus says to love them and pray for them. Now what does that look like?

A. Do good to them

Let's take this verse, little item – He, Jesus, says, “Love your enemies; do good to those people, to that individual.” How can we love them and why do you say – what do you mean “Do good to them” – where are you getting that from?

In the parallel passage in Luke 6:35, comparing scripture with scripture, Jesus says this:

Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great.

You love them by doing good to them – you respond to them in a way that somehow profits them, that helps them, that ministers to them, even if it is simply on a totally physical level. You settle in your mind that “what I'm going to do, when I have an enemy, when I have someone that hurts me, when I have someone that opposes me and irritates me, I'm going to respond, not with retaliation – Jesus has already forbidden that in Matthew 5:38-42 – I'm going to respond in a way that meets a need of his or hers if it is in my power to do it.”

In the passage that John Strickland read for us earlier, in Romans 12:17 – I want to take you back there, turn to this. This is not an isolated theme in the scriptures. This is not something that the preacher has gone wrong on and is making a wrong application to – the scriptures are abundantly clear. In Romans 12:17, the Apostle Paul said:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Your heart disposition must be one of peace, of absence of conflict, of absence of grudges, of absence of bitterness. This is what the Lord commands; this is what the disciple of Christ – this is what his life *must* be like; these are not suggestions.

Romans 12:19:

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

Romans 12:20:

“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

Your loving, gracious response to that person brings shame on that person who has sought to do evil against you. Romans 12:21:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Now you can go back to Matthew chapter 5. Jesus gives these commands about loving your enemies, praying for those who persecute you – He gives those in a grammatical form that emphasizes that this is to be the repeated pattern of your life. When this comes up, when these issues come up in your life, your repeated consistent responsibility before your Lord and Savior is to respond with love, with doing good, with meeting needs, thinking about what their situation is, what that enemy’s situation is, and meeting their needs. Not seeking your own vengeance, not striking back, not retaliating. You say, “Lord, they have done me wrong – You know that, but I’m going to commit the acquittal of that, I’m going to commit the recompense of that, into Your hands. And in the meantime, I’m going to do what You told me to do: I’m going to love them, I’m going to do good to them.”

Now beloved, let me step back and ask you a question – that’s awfully convicting, isn’t it? It convicts me, it crushes me. And beloved, it *should* – it should humble us, and if the Spirit of God is shooting an arrow in to your heart as we talk about these things, beloved, you need to let that arrow find its mark – don’t dodge it, don’t resist it, but let that pain of conviction on your conscience be that which drives you to confession of your sin. The pain in your conscience of this should drive you on your knees before the Lord and you say, “Lord, You’re like this, but I’m not; I fall short of Your character. Please forgive me for my sin. You have told me not to be like this and yet I am.” And in that confession and in that breaking of your heart, in that humbling of yourself before the Lord, beloved, take heart in the fact that He says the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses you from every sin.

This kind of conviction on things that go to the very heart of our desires and the things that animate us the most – when we are convicted of that, beloved, what the Lord is doing in your life at that time is trying to draw you in to a deeper, more humble relationship with Himself so that you can know deeper joy and better manifest His character in the days that He gives you on this earth.

You don’t run from this kind of conviction; you don’t excuse yourself and say, “Yeah, but preacherboy, if you knew what it was really like, you wouldn’t be saying this. If they had done to you what they did to me, you would understand.” Forget that; it doesn’t matter how I would respond if I was in your shoes – that’s irrelevant. How anyone else would respond to the hurts that you had over the years is absolutely irrelevant to how you respond to them. What you must do is say, “Lord, I’m living to please one person and that’s You; what do You say about this?”

And Jesus comes and says: “I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “Okay Lord, I’m not like that in my own strength, I need You to change me. You command what You wish and give me the strength to fulfill it because I will obey. I will let go, my God and King – I will let go of this stuff and I will do what You say because You are the Lord of all, You are the Captain of my soul, and what You say is law to me to be obeyed.” That’s the only way you can respond.

And so a command like this exposes everything that you really have in your heart toward the Lord Jesus Christ – no two ways about it. Do you prefer your bitterness to the authority of Christ, or will you rid yourself of the bitterness in response to what He says? For those of us who name the name of Christ, those are the only two options. You either walk out of this place changed because of what Jesus says here and changed in your response to those difficult relationships, or you walk out in sin – take your pick, He leaves us with no other options.

Now secondly, how should you love your enemies and in what manner do you love them? You do good to them. Secondly, Jesus says, you pray for them.

B. Pray for them

Look at verse 44 again, where Jesus says:

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Go back to verse 11 for just a minute and recognize how bad that persecution can be. Matthew 5:11:

When people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you...

It's a bad case scenario here – this isn't just a minor irritation that you brush off like it's your morning dandruff on your coat. No, no, this is critical stuff. And so what do you do? He says, "Pray for them." This is so convicting but so necessary. What He is saying is that you go to God and you pray for their welfare. If they are unbelievers, you pray for their salvation. If they are Christians, you pray that they would grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And then you fill in details from there, that's the perspective that you bring to it.

But either way, beloved, whether it's an unbeliever or someone who names the name of Christ – get this – when you bend your knees, when you clasp your hands and close your eyes to pray to God, God is expecting you to bring your enemies before Him as objects of your sincere intercession – that's what it says, isn't it? How simple can this be if He says "pray for those who persecute you"? You don't need to know a law degree to figure out what that means. When you pray, pray for those who persecute you.

And here is the spiritual heart challenge for you, beloved, and for me. What that means in your prayer life is this: it means that when these people are in your prayers, you take your interests out of the equation. You take your bad feelings, you confess those, but you take the impact that that person has on you out of the equation and you put their spiritual needs and their well-being ahead of your earthly circumstances. Instead of complaining to God and calling – and we all do this – calling God down on your side of the argument, "God, help that person to see that I'm right, okay?" (Laughter) You laugh because that's what you do. We have to go beyond that, we have to go beyond that and pray something

more like this, if it's an unbeliever. You say, "God, I would not be selfish with Your grace. Yes, this person has harmed me, but Lord, they are outside of Christ; their eternal soul is in danger, O God, and that is far more important than my earthly circumstances. O God, have mercy on them and redeem them from sin and hell."

That kind of command from our Lord gets in our face. But child of God, you who love the Lord Jesus Christ, let me say this to you, let me call something very important to mind that must change the way that you think about this, which must melt your heart before these things that are so challenging: How did Jesus pray for His tormentors when He was being crucified, when the iron spikes were through His hands and feet, as He pushed Himself up on the peg just to try to get a breath – how did He pray? The Bible says repeatedly – in the original language *repeatedly* – He prayed this way:

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

In utter humiliation on that cross, looking down upon the ones who put Him there, He says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." That's Luke 23:34, by the way if you want to look it up later.

Earlier in Luke 19:41, when He approached Jerusalem and was mindful of the judgment that would soon come upon that sinful city, what did He do? He wept over it, He heaved sobs over the people that were about to face the righteous judgment of God and He wept over them. There was none of that sinful vengeance that we so often feel in our own hearts that animated anything about the Lord Jesus Christ. He prayed for those who taunted Him. He was moved to compassion and tears in His concern for those who rejected Him.

The Bible says: "He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked." And here in Matthew 5, that same Lord says that's what you are to be like. The power of that, the force of that on your heart and conscience, is absolutely overwhelming. What can you say in response to that except, "Of course, Lord, this is only right"? And beloved, this is why only Christians can live this way – because that argument has no force with an unbelieving man who rejects Christ. But for you who say that you love the Lord Jesus Christ, for you who truly have had your sins taken away and His righteousness given to you, for you for whom He shed His blood, for you for whom He said, "Father, not My will but Thine be done," for you who understand that the moral force of this is absolutely conclusive, this is how you must be. You have to love your enemies; you have to do good to them; you have to pray for them. It is what the Lord commands; we are left with nowhere else to go.

So you do good for them. You know who I'm talking about in your life. "Lord, how can I do good for that person? Lord, I pray for that person right now and bring them before You. I'm not going to wait until I get out of the jam to obey You, Father. I pray for them even now. Have mercy on them even if they never have mercy on me."

Well, the beauty of what Jesus says here in this passage for us is that He doesn't just leave us with a bare command to go out and do those things. In verse 44 He says:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

He could have just said that and left it at that. But He goes on and gives you reasons why it is good and necessary for you to do that. He gives you reasons that are addressed to your understanding, and when your understanding is engaged and you remember the things that we are about to talk about – you remember those things and say, “Yes, that makes perfect sense, I understand that” – that understanding begins to move in your heart. Your heart responds to what your mind understands, and then your will is activated to say, “Yes, that is what I will do.” That's what Jesus does as pattern of scripture – not just to give bare commands, but to give us reasons that we can embrace. We find these reasons in the second question here that we've already partially answered.

The first question was: How should you love your enemies? Second question is this:

3. Why Should You Love Your Enemies?

Now, loving our enemies is contrary to the natural desires of our heart. Trust me, if we didn't have the scriptures on this point, if we didn't have the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit, we would all be very bitter and vengeful people – some of you are anyway, but that's a point for another time, something for you on your knees before the Lord. Loving our enemies is absolutely contrary to every natural instinct that we might have. It's contrary to our self-interest; it's contrary to our sinful desires. And so you must – get this – you must understand *why* it is that you must love your enemies so that you can manifest this kind of character. You need to understand why you should love your enemy so that you are motivated to have this kind of spiritual growth. And every one of us can grow in this area without question. Why is it that this is necessary? Why is it that this is good?

A. The authority of Jesus Christ

First of all – why should you love your enemies? – the authority of Jesus Christ. Look at verse 44 again, where Jesus says, “But” – look at that capital letter right there: “**I** say to you...” It's emphatic in the original – Jesus is distinguishing Himself from the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, the false authority of the scribes and Pharisees, and on His own individual, first person, singular authority says:

I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

By His very authority, He says to love your enemies. That's the first reason why you should love them: Jesus said so. And if you have received Christ as Lord, the matter of His authority is a settled issue. This is what Jesus commands. To do anything less in response, to refuse this command, to try to negotiate it, try to explain why it doesn't apply to you to do any of that, beloved, is S-I-N – *sin*, if you were having trouble

following the spelling there. To refuse Jesus on this matter is sinful; that's what I was alluding to earlier. This is a direct command, and so you must obey because it is what Jesus says.

Secondly – why should you love your enemies? It's not just the authority of Christ; it is:

B. The actions of God

Look at verse 45, where Jesus says:

So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven – what does HE do? – He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

You love your enemies, you pray for those who persecute you because in this manner – get this – in this manner you show forth the character that belongs to the heavenly Father, God Himself. And as you do that, you show forth that you belong to Him as one of His sons. This is what God does 24-7, 365 days a year. This is what He has been doing ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden and plunged all of us into ruin and destruction. For thousands and thousands of years, God has been showing goodness to His enemies – He never stops.

Notice His sovereignty in this: “He causes His sun” – He owns the sun and He causes it to rise on the evil and the good. He “sends rain” – the rain obeys His command and He sends it on the righteous and the unrighteous. This is what the theologians call *common grace*, that grace of God in which He gives temporal blessings to all people regardless of whether or not they belong to His kingdom. This kind of grace doesn't bring any one to salvation in and of itself, but it allows even the unsaved to enjoy blessings in this life.

Think about it: God has every right to condemn the unrighteous immediately in to eternal judgment – that's what their sins deserve. They are His enemies; they hang, as Jonathan Edwards said, by a spider's web over the dark gaping mouth of hell itself. But God gives them grace – God sends the good days upon them, God sends the rain on their fields as well as on the fields of the righteous. They don't deserve that, but God shows them that goodness anyway. And the powerful point is this: If an infinitely holy God who holds all judgment in His hands treats His enemies that way, then you should too, even if it is an ungrateful spouse, a disobedient child, a stingy boss, an inconsiderate coworker, a bad neighbor, a Moslem that holds a knife to your throat – this is how you respond to your enemies.

You have to remember a verse like Romans 5:10, which says:

While we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son.

God extended His grace to you when you were His enemy, now you imitate Him by giving grace to your enemies as well. You can't save them, but you can display that same kind of common grace that God does to them.

So beloved, think about it this way – if you want an illustration that will stick with you and remind you of this – every time the sun shines, every time the rain falls, God is being gracious to His enemies. And every time you see a sunny day, every single one of them, every time you see a rain falling that waters the earth, it is another reminder to you to love your enemies even when they don't deserve it. This is inescapable; all of this is the environment in which we live. All around us is evidence that God is being good to unrighteous people, and the compelling implication of that is that's what you are to do also.

So, the authority of Christ and the actions of God compel you to love your enemies. Jesus gives you a final reason in this passage and it is:

C. The actions of sinners

The actions of sinners compel you to this kind of love for your enemies. Look at verses 46-47 – He says:

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Jesus says as a general rule, the worst of sinners will show love and kindness to their friends, to people who respond in like manner. And those people, those sinners, are spiritually destitute. The worst of sinners as a general rule respond with love and favor to those who show that to them. And so beloved, if that's all that you do, if you are kind to people that are kind to you and you retaliate against people that wrong you, Jesus is saying, "How are you any better than they are? How do you exceed sinners if that's the way you live your life?"

No, beloved, no. If you are born again by the Spirit of God, if you are a new creation in Christ, then you must go beyond the lowly standard of the world and show forth the greater life that belongs to those who are truly in the kingdom of God. Your life must have a higher virtue than that of unsaved sinners around you. I don't hesitate to say, beloved, that in my judgment, this is the most spiritually challenging and difficult teaching we have encountered so far in the entire Sermon on the Mount – no question about it. It is what the Lord commands, it is His example, it comes from the One to whom we owe our earthly existence and our eternal destiny – how can we refuse Him? We can't.

Jesus sums it all up in verse 48. He brings all of this section, verses 21-47, to a final conclusion here when He says:

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is the summary conclusion of what God requires from you. This is the summary conclusion of the aspiration of your heart. Jesus has called us to a deep inner righteousness that reflects the perfect character of God Himself. We are to show forth that character in all of its purity, honesty, and charity. The glory of that call is surpassing. Jesus commands this because as a direction of your life, you can live this way. He stands on the mount as it were and He says, “Come up here; come up out of the spiritual muck that you have been living in and live at a level that expresses the character of God Himself because you are meant to manifest these characteristics if you are a believer in Christ.”

Yes, beloved, you can live this way; you must live this way. You have the indwelling Holy Spirit. You have within you the very same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead to energize your efforts to live in the way that He has commanded. God has not given this bare command to people without also giving His children the capacity to live it out. So while the standard convicts us, it also calls us to higher ground.

Yet beloved, we know and understand that it convicts us, this standard shames us as it exposes our sin. Who among you is absolutely free from anger, lust, and shading the truth? Who among you has never retaliated when someone wronged you? Who among you responds in perfect love to your enemies? We stand broken before the cross.

But beloved, hear me out as I finish here: In the midst of that rightful conviction on your conscience, hear a word of comfort. Jesus Christ came in to the world to save sinners just like you. And when He died on the cross, He took upon Himself every sin of those who would ever believe in Him. And when God raised Him from the dead, your justification was secured. If you have believed in Christ, you are forgiven and called to this subsequent standard. If you are still outside of Christ, today is the day for you to repent and put your faith in Him because the Word has exposed that you are a sinner under the judgment of God.

Beloved, every one of you has to rise above being a victim and manifest the victory over the world that is yours in Christ. So trust in Christ, rejoice in Him, and then go and sin no more. Let’s pray:

Father, how deeply Your word searches us and exposes us at the very core of who we are and what we do and how we react. The standard that You called us to would be absurd, but for the fact that we saw it lived out in the Lord Jesus Christ, but for we see You commanding it from us, but for the fact that we see that You have given us spiritual provision to live this way.

Father, we understand that perfection in this life is not a goal that we permanently attain and achieve to and never stray from again. But Lord, the desire and the direction of every believing heart in this room is to aspire after that which You have commanded. So give us grace to that end, Father. Give us grace to love our enemies and to pray for

those who persecute us. Lord, give us grace that we might come closer to that standard of perfection that You command, trusting You for the grace when we fail, but trusting You also for the provision that we need to rise above the people that we have been before this day and to excel still more.

Father, give to us what You have commanded in this passage. We admit our bankruptcy; we admit our need for Christ. But from the depths of our hearts, Lord, we plead, help us to live this way because we hunger and thirst for this kind of righteousness in our lives. Lord Jesus, to You be all the glory, to You be all the thanks for Your saving work on the cross. We are so grateful and will be saying "thank you" for all of eternity as we look upon Your face. In Your precious name, amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.