

## Love for Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

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C.S. Lewis, responding to a criticism that he didn't care much for the Sermon on the Mount, said: If "caring for" means liking or enjoying it, I suppose no one cares for it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledgehammer? I can hardly think, he continues, of a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure.

We come today to yet another opportunity – and it is a gift of mercy – another divine opportunity, to be knocked flat on our faces by the sledgehammer of the Word of God. This is our final sermon on Jesus' exposition of the law in Matthew chapter 5. Our text is verses 43 through 48. This is the sixth and final antithesis. The final glimpse of what it means to have a righteousness which surpasses the scribes and Pharisees. We shall make four points: The Error in v.43, The Correction in vv. 44-45, The Rebuke in vv. 46-48, and the Standard in v.48.

### I. Error

First, then, the error. We begin, as usual, with Jesus citing what they, apparently, have commonly heard: You have heard that it was said: Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Now, we have here, for the first time, an actual distortion of the law. Usually, the "you have heard it said" portions, have simply quoted the law, or a reasonable summary of it. Jesus, the fulfiller of the law, then goes on to expand its true meaning, its depth, and how it applies in his kingdom.

Here, though, we have a "you have heard it said," which is seriously corrupted. It is corrupt in two ways. First, by what it omits, and second, and more importantly, by what it adds. What it omits, when it cites the "Love your neighbor" command, which comes from Leviticus 19, is the "as yourself" part. That is what makes the command to love one's neighbor demanding, that little "as yourself" part.

So, while that absence is significant, it's what they add which is the real problem. Love your neighbor and, they add, hate your enemy. What they are trying to do, and we all have this tendency, is to restrict the sphere of who counts as a neighbor. (To make this command about how to love, into a command about who

to love?) Quite probably, they would point out, that in the IMMEDIATE context of Lev. 19, the ones addressed are the house of Israel. “Do not hate a *fellow Israelite* in your heart..

<sup>18</sup> “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone *among your people*, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”

So, loving Jews, loving one’s kin or one’s nation – that is fine – but, the implication must be, we can hate our enemies. After all, our enemies are God’s enemies. And certainly that is the way Jesus’ listeners viewed the Roman State and its collaborators. (other political party) But, as mentioned, this is a (gross) distortion of the law. In that same chapter laws are given to provide gleanings for the poor and the SOJOURNER.

Later, again in the very same chapter, it says: The alien living with you must be treated as one of the native-born. Love him *as yourself (notice that)*, for you were aliens in Egypt. The law, in Exodus, says that if you see your *enemy’s* ox straying, you are to return it to him. If you see your *enemy’s* ox under a heavy burden, you are to help it.

Proverbs 25 says: if your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. A text that Paul cites in Romans 12.

There shall be ONE law, Exodus 12 says, for the native-born and the alien. No double standard – one law. The Jews of Jesus’ day have apparently come to believe, and again, this is the natural human instinct, that love stops at the borders of family or nation. Maybe it was the Imprecatory Psalms, the Psalms which call down judgment on enemies. Though those are not pleas for personal vengeance, for Christ is often the speaker of those Psalms. They have no taint of malice and find their fulfillment in the prayers of the martyrs, and in the cry for the kingdom to come. Maybe it was wars against the Canaanites. or any or all of Israel’s militarism. Whatever it was, they had to come to believe that it was downright patriotic to hate their enemies.

Jesus will have none of this. In Luke’s gospel he tells the famous parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to precisely this question: Who is my neighbor? And it’s clear he thinks the neighbor can be an enemy, or any human being in our sphere of influence. He rejects the friends and family neighbor plan. So, that is what they have heard: Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

## **II. Correction**

Secondly, then, the correction. Now, Jesus says, shockingly, but I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. So he does not simply reject hatred. He does not call for a sort of benign detachment toward our

enemies. He calls us to love them. Present imperative – not sporadic. Consistent, perpetual love.

There are four things to note about this love. First, while it is concrete and practical, it must entail some genuine emotion, some true desire for the good of our enemies. It is possible to give all you have to the poor and give your body over to be burned, Paul says, and still not have love. Love is not SIMPLY a feeling (much more), but it entails a genuine heart-felt desire for (a willing, possibly in the teeth of contrary feeling) for the other's good. Surely, Jesus, who is the great example here, did not merely love his enemies externally. He loved them from the heart. He wept over them and desired their peace.

Second, this love acts. Specifically, to cite Luke's version of this same passage: we are to do good to those who hate us (to lend without expecting anything in return). As Proverbs said: if your enemy is hungry feed him, if he's thirsty give him something to drink. Ultimately this command is rooted in the gospel. In the atoning agony of Jesus. For while we were yet ENEMIES, he demonstrated the love of God toward us by dying. People who hate their enemies, have amnesia about their own enemy status, and thus, they have forgotten the gospel itself.

Third, this love is revealed in speech toward our enemies. Again, from Luke's version, *bless* those who persecute you. This love positively calls down the blessing of God on those who assail us. Paul says: bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. We ought to practice this, in all the various little slights and indignities we suffer in life. (We must create and be the bearers of a culture of benediction, not a culture of cursing, criticism and judgment)

Fourth, this love PRAYS for its enemies. Chrysostom: "this is the highest summit of self-control." Bonhoeffer calls this: "the supreme command. Through the medium of prayer, he says, we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God." Again, the model is Jesus who prayed while spikes were being driven into his hands and feet: Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.

The love is internal, from the heart, it acts, it speaks or blesses, and finally, at the summit, it prays. For in praying you stand on the side of the enemy, you lift them up before the face of God, you imitate Him who, in his anguish, prayed for his enemies. (As Stephen did when he prayed for his murderers in Acts 7) This is the active love which fleshes out further what we saw last week about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile. Those commands were not, we saw, nearly as passive as one might think. They were in fact, a form of active resistance. A revolutionary way of being revolutionary. The active nature of our non-violent resistance is on full view in this text here.

We are to do this, Jesus says, that we might be children of our Father in heaven. This is how we demonstrate and prove our Sonship. This is, if you will, the way we show the family traits, the family likeness and resemblance. We do this

because, Jesus, says, this is the general, daily way God behaves. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

When we think of God's love for his enemies we, rightly, think of Jesus' example and his cross. But Jesus points us to his Father's common work. The rising of the sun, the sending of the rain. What theologians call common grace, because it's common to all, indiscriminate in its generosity. Like the Father, our love cannot be withheld from, or exclude, or even diminished toward, the enemy or the unrighteous. To do so is to betray the family's father.

### **III. Rebuke**

Our third point is the rebuke. In v.46 Jesus says: if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Even sinners (Gentiles, dogs, as the Jews called them) love those who love them. Are not even the tax-collectors, the unclean traitors, the greedy Roman-loving extortioners, are they not doing that? Even abortionists or Jihadists love their families. Mafia members love their families. Nazi's loved their friends. There is no righteousness in that-- which exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees. And if you greet only your own people, v.47 says, and greet here means more than "hello" it includes wishing them well, what are you doing more than others?

Indeed, greeting and loving one's own, one's friends, while it's a good thing, can often be a kind of self-love. One can be an ego-centric narcissist and still greet and love one's friends. It's not hard. Even the pagans do that, Jesus says. And if this is how we live – love our side, hate their side – then Jesus says our righteousness is on the level of those we deem least righteous. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century that meant the pagans and the sell-out tax collecting Jews. Today: The unbelievers and the those we perceive as religious compromisers. And people of a different political party from us.

There is a key word for this whole section of the Sermon on the Mount, sort of tucked away in v.47, and it's the word "more." What "MORE" are you doing than others? How, exactly does loving only your close relations, exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, or of anybody for that matter? This MORE here IS the Christian distinctive. It is what the Father does, it is what Jesus did, and it is to be seen in THAT very inclusive, promiscuous, unbounded love and generosity of God wrought out in us.

Yes, we are to love our kin, our nation, our church in unique and tender ways. That is not in dispute here. Jesus rarely stops to try and be "balanced." But we are called to this radical, revolutionary "more." (what makes us peculiar is this "beyond all that.") And we can start to show it in how we react, and what we do, when our friends, our brethren, say or do something that makes them – sort of –

a kind of temporary enemy. Do good to them, speak blessing to them, pray for them.

#### **IV. Standard**

Finally, the Standard. Jesus says: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Basically this call to love is a call to imitate the Father, and as we imitate him we are to become more like him. We become what we mimic. Perfect here does not mean sinless perfection, for Jesus will shortly after this tell the disciples that we are to pray DAILY for the forgiveness of our sins. Perfect here means to reflect the love of God in the way the text has just called us to. Luke's summary gets at what is meant well: Be merciful even as your Father in heaven is merciful.

It's all there in the beatitude on mercy, all these virtues stand or fall together. Imitate this inclusive, non-discriminating, all-embracing love and goodness of the Father for his enemies — God does all six antitheses: he is unstained by unjust anger, he keeps his oaths, faithful to marriage covenant, he gives to those who dishonor him, he loves his enemies. Reflect his fullness of perfection in a love that is extended freely and at great cost to all. Even your enemies. This is the way of the cross. What Bonhoeffer called “the differential of the Christian religion.”

One commentator, A. Plummer, said: “To return evil for good is devilish. To return good for good is human. And to return good for evil is divine.” And reflecting the divine, the Father, is your calling. Chrysostom (5<sup>th</sup> c. father) from last two antitheses trace 9 ascending steps of godliness in confronting the enemy:

1. No evil initiative ourselves.
2. Not to avenge evil.
3. Be quiet (silence)
4. Suffer wrongfully.
5. Surrender to evil doer even more than he demands.
6. Must not hate him.
7. Love him.
8. Do good to him.
- 9 – the Summit “entreat God himself on his behalf.”

We must move from non-resistance to love. Augustine: many have learned to offer the other cheek (joking?), but do not know how to love him by whom they were struck. This love of enemy, Jesus places as the sixth antitheses, the final example of the greater righteousness. This is the summit of Christian ethics. It is the epitome of Christ-likeness. It is imitation of the Father. And the history of the church is often nothing other than a closing oneself off from this commandment. I

charge you to: Hear afresh. Let it jolt you. Don't domesticate it, don't "whatabout" it to death. Don't cut it into pieces with a dozen qualifications.

Polycarp, 2<sup>nd</sup> century martyr, disciple of John the apostle, in his letter to the Philippian church, shows how deep this teaching was absorbed in the early church, he writes:

Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings and powers and rulers. And for those who persecute and hate you. And for the enemies of the cross. In order that your fruit may be evident among all people, that you may be perfect in him.

Through the church, from the second to the twenty-first century, the radical summons from our Lord – the sledgehammer - rings out. Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. For thus we shall be children, sons and daughters, who bear the likeness, and who reflect the perfection, of our heavenly Father. Amen.

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