

“Loving our Enemies as God Loves Us”

Matthew 5:43-48

June 10, 2018

If you have only lived in the plains of ND, it would be hard to imagine what its like to experience the grandeur of mountains for the depth of the Grand Canyon. Not until we get right up to the precipice of the canyon, can we grasp its depth. In a similar way, Jesus wants to take us beyond surface living. And this morning He brings us right up to the precipice of the “Grand Canyon” of true discipleship. Nothing plummets the depths of discipleship more than loving one’s enemies.

As we come to the last portion of Matthew 5, let me remind you of the context of today’s passage. In vss. 17-20, Jesus clarified that He had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Yet, upholding God’s law meant contradicting the tradition of the Pharisees because they had distorted the true meaning of the law. So on the one hand Jesus is restoring the true meaning of the law and on the other giving us examples of how our understanding of righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

- To avoid a murderous heart, we must rid of an angry heart (21-26)
- To avoid an adulterous heart, we must be rid of a lustful heart (127-30)
- A divorce-prone heart must be replaced with a reconciling heart (31-32)
- A deceitful heart must be replaced with a truth-loving heart of integrity (33-37)
- A heart of self-interest must suspend personal rights to rightly reflect God’s heart to others (38-42)
 - Last week I suggested that we have legitimate personal rights such as human dignity and personal decision-making. Yet there are times when for the sake of the gospel, we are free to suspend those rights to manifest God’s love. That’s true, yet its incomplete. It still leaves us in a position of autonomy/independence that is foreign to biblical discipleship. The spirit of a true disciple is relinquishing all rights of self to Jesus as King and Lord. Then any decision to suspend “personal rights” is determined by obedience to Him.
- *A heart of discriminate love must be replaced with a gracious heart of indiscriminate love (43-48)*

In this final example, we come to perhaps the most demanding and humanly impossible teaching of Jesus: *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

Here Jesus is responding to the Pharisee’s teaching in vs. 43 which was much more humanly attainable. They said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” Doesn’t that sound easier? Doesn’t that seem natural? Perhaps the Pharisees were wrestling with a seeming tension in the OT that some of us have also wrestled with.¹

On the one hand the OT clearly teaches that we should love our neighbor. **Lev 19:18** required, *“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.”*

Yet the call for love did not stop with our neighbor. The OT also called for a loving response to the aliens and strangers among them by doing good to them (). Exodus 23 went so far as command love for one’s personal enemies: *“If you meet your enemies ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of the one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him.”* And all us are familiar with the proverb, *“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink”* (Prov 25:21). So the OT itself had enough evidence that God calls us to indiscriminate love to both our neighbor and our enemy.

The tension arises when we come across other passages that seem to violate the law of love, passages which would seem to support the Pharisee’s teaching to hate one’s enemy. For example, in **Deut 7** God told the Israelites that when they entered the promised land they were to utterly wipe out the Canaanites—utterly destroy them. Or what do we do with the **imprecatory Psalms** in which the psalmist calls down curses upon his enemies? How do we account for these things? Let me respond in several ways:

sound biblical teaching on judgment, one’s teaching will be skewed and promote a weak, rather than biblical, worldview.

¹ Good biblical teaching, does not ignore the challenging or seeming tensions we find in Scripture, but rather addresses them in view of an understanding of the whole counsel of God. For example, if someone only teaches on love but avoids

1. In terms of personal relationships, including enemies at a personal level, the consistent message of the Bible (OT & NT) is to demonstrate love.
2. In case of Dt 7 where God commands His people to wipe out entire peoples, God Himself is acting in a judicial matter. He is enacting His holy and righteous divine judgment against a wicked people and using Israel as the instrument in His hand to do it. Keep in mind, Israel didn't have the freedom to just wipe out whoever they wanted, but only by direct command of God.
3. In the imprecatory Psalms, the psalmist is not taking personal revenge on his enemies but asking God to bring to justice God's own enemies out of jealousy for God's righteous glory. For example, in Psalm 69 when David prays that God would pour out His indignation on them and let His burning anger overtake them, it's not just a personal vendetta. Earlier in vs. 9 he said, "zeal for Your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me." David is expressing righteous indignation. Not exacting His own vengeance but asking God to vindicate God's own name and leaving justice in the hands of God.

So there is clearly a place for a judicial response to evil. There is a place for righteous anger, praying that God would bring judgment against evil. Yet, the most godlike response when it comes to *personal* offenses and personal enemies, is to be gracious to those who don't deserve it by imitating the character of God through acts of undeserved love. So just as we saw last week, there is legitimate place for both a judicial response to evil and a personal response of love to co-exist.

The heart of Jesus' teaching is this:

When we treat all people with God-like character regardless of who they are or what they do to us, we will love even our enemies. To say it another way, God's character (especially His graciousness to undeserving sinners) establishes the pattern for how we should lovingly relate to our enemies.

Vs. 45 says this is the way we manifest our sonship. What do sons do? They imitate, they represent, they reflect their father. By their very nature they

resemble their Father. So how do we carry out our sonship? By resembling our Father's gracious character in our own character.

Jesus reminds us of how immensely gracious our Father's character is in vs. 45: "***He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.***" Take a moment to reflect on that. This is what we call common grace. Grace that is common to all people and grace that we could not live without on this earth. Every year for thousands of years, every person irrespective of their heart toward God, has been the recipient of God's undeserved grace.

The first thing I think of when I read this verse is of an old farmer that my dad worked for during a brief season during his "retirement." He was successful in that he had an extremely large farm, but he was probably one of the most vile, God-defying, vulgar men I've ever known and it was especially magnified in vulgarity of his son, even when he was in elementary school. This farmer is no longer living, but for perhaps 40 years of his farming life, God caused the rain to fall on his land. God caused the sun to shine and the crops to grow all the while that this man lived in defiance against God.

And he is just one of billions. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Idi Amin were recipients for common grace for their whole earthly lives. The sun and the rain fell on their land and oxygen filled their lungs. As we speak, God causes the sun and rain to fall on Kim Jong-un of North Korea.

What does this reveal about our God? We know that none of these men will escape God's holy judgment, yet God is so gracious that he extends life-sustaining grace even to His enemies. What that reveals about God is that His character of love is so perfect, mature, and flawless, that it does not change even in the face of vile enemies (yet without ever compromising His holiness).

This is the character we are to have as His children. Vs. 48 says, "therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word *perfect*, *teleios*, carries the idea of complete or mature. In other words, nothing is lacking. No flaws can be found.

There is nothing lacking in our Father's love. It is not conditioned on other people. His character of love is perfect which means He is able to consistently love even when He's not loved back or when mistreated because His love is based on His own perfect character of love rather than on the attractiveness or character of the other person. This is how He loves His enemies and how He calls us to love ours.

There are two ways to respond to vs. 8. Some will say, "but that's impossible. I can't be perfect!" And so they write it off as something that can't be done. Yet a better response is to say, "this is humanly impossible! I need the Spirit's enabling to love others as God as loved me." And so they run to God for supernatural grace.

If I may paraphrase vs. 46-47, "If you are only kind to those who love you, if you only greet your friends, how does that show your distinction as children of God? Even gangs do that." But you will distinctively reflect your father when out of God-like character, you extend love and grace to even your enemies regardless of how they treat you.

Perhaps it would be good to pause for a moment and ask, what do we mean by love when are talking about loving our enemies? Let me offer this simple definition of love: **Love is actively seeking another person's good (and sometimes feeling affection toward them).** The fact that you don't like your enemy doesn't have to keep you from treating them in a loving way. You don't have to like someone in order to love them. One great saint encouraged us not to worry or feel bad about not liking certain people because God has never called us to like everyone. But He has called us to have a character of love toward everyone.² In other words, treat them in the same way you'd treat someone you like. That's love.

You say, "but I don't want to be a hypocrite, acting as though I love someone even though I don't feel like it." Mere emotions don't have the power to produce love for your enemies. Only godly character infused with the Spirit's power can. If you wait until you feel like loving your enemy,

you'll never obey Jesus' command. Feelings do not open the doorway of obedience, but godly character does.

Our goal is not to assess what other people do or do not deserve from us, but to treat all people with gracious, God-like character.

So what practical steps might we take toward loving our enemy?

1. ***Remember that loving one's enemy means loving yourself less.*** Lloyd-Jones reminds us of the irony that if we are loyal to self, we give people undue power over us, where as if we become more detached from self, more insensitive to self, people have less power to offend us. In the words of Lloyd-Jones, "***Until a man is detached from himself he will never be detached from what others do to that self. As long as a man is living for himself, he is sensitive, watchful and jealous; he is envious and is therefore always reacting immediately to what others do.***" (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)³
2. ***Begin with loving your brother well. You will never love well in hard relationships if you don't excel in loving those who love you.*** Daily train yourself to be selfless, to contribute sacrifice to those you love.
3. ***Remember how God has loved you.*** It's God's perfect character of love that you are called to emulate. ***Its His gracious love that must fill you if it will overflow you.*** (see Romans 5:8, 10). Romans 5 reminds us that God sacrificially loved us when we were still enemies sinning against Him.
4. ***Pray for your own heart to be shaped more by God's grace than by self-interest.***
5. ***Pray for your enemy.*** Pray for his conversion. Pray for a change of heart. ***Pray for God to bless him by having mercy on him in the same way God has shown mercy toward you.*** Remember what

² Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, pg. 271.

³ Ibid., 268-269.

Jesus prayed from the cross, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34).

“[Love] indeed, sees all the hatefulness and the wickedness of the enemy, feels his stabs and his blows, may even have something to do [with] warding them off; but all this simply fills the loving heart of the one desire and aim, to free its enemy from his hate, to rescue him from his sin, and thus to save his soul. Mere affection is often blind, but even then it thinks that it sees something attractive in the one [it is drawn to]; higher love may see nothing attractive in the one so loved,...its inner motive is simply to bestow true blessing on the one loved, to do him the highest good.”⁴

6. ***Don't react out of mere emotion. Respond with God-honoring character. Slow down. Think. Pray. Act in love.***

7. ***Anticipate supernatural grace to meet you at the point of obedience.***

When we treat all people with God-like character regardless of who they are or what they do to us, we will love even our enemies.

⁴ R.C. H. Lenski quoted by John MacArthur, *MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 1-7*, pg. 345.