

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

September 17, 2023

Pastor Francis Bezzam

⁴³ “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 rise on the evil and on 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.

If you are asked the question - What is a disciple of Jesus Christ. What would you say?

Consider this description in light of this passage.

A disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who is formerly an enemy of God but has now become a child of God. And as an enemy of God, I have rebelled, defied, revolted, disregarded and mutinied against the Law of God. And living a life opposing the perfect Law of God, I have dishonored God, His Son Jesus Christ and resisted the Holy Spirit. And by dishonoring God, I have earned and deserved the wrath of God. However, when I heard the good news that God demonstrated his matchless love, the love that God showed to the world by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die on behalf of sinners, that anyone who repents and trusts in Jesus Christ as the only Savior of their hell-bound soul is fully forgiven and is heaven bound instead of hell. When I heard his news, I put my faith in Jesus Christ. And by faith I repented and trusted in Jesus that He died for me and forgave me of my sin. Even though I was formerly God’s enemy, now, as a disciple, Jesus calls me his friend. His grace has turned me from foe to friend. And now I want to live a life learning from Jesus Christ. A disciple means a learner. And I want to learn from Jesus Christ. Jesus teaches to deny myself and follow him. Because Jesus loves me and gave himself up for me, I want to learn to love like Jesus Christ, even my enemies.

Now, consider another way of thinking. BTW Jesus would never recommend this way of thinking.

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ because I have favor with God. Because I have favor with God, I am free to love those who love me and hate those who hate me. I don’t need to love those who hate me because they don’t have the favor of God like I do. Those who hate me deserve worse things in life. I hate those who hate God too.

Would you ever say that? And, if you never said these things, would you ever have thought these things in your heart?

And I wonder how many believers like that today? The digital world has it made it easier for us to display micro-hatred and micro-aggression towards others. Someone is mean to you, block them.

Well, the truth is that the Pharisees and scribes taught their people to *love* a fellow Israelite and *regard* everyone else as an *enemy*.

Did you know that the hatred, animosity and bitterness was so out of bounds that the Jews regarded Gentiles as dogs? Yes, dogs. This was a very offensive term. And in return the Gentiles hated the Jews too. The teaching of that day justified the hate.

Now, if you recall Matthew chapter fifteen, you will see a time when Jesus calls Canaanites as little dogs. However, this was not a derogatory term. This was rather an endearing term that Jesus uses to test the faith of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus for help. I wanted to share in case you thought that Jesus used a term as well. Well, the answer is he did not. But that is teaching for another day.

But today, as we come to the consideration of the sixth statement by our Lord Jesus Christ, you see our Lord beginning this passage by saying, “*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”*”.

This was the distorted teaching in Jesus’s day.

Which part was distorted, specifically?

Not the “love your neighbor” part but the latter.

You will *not* see the verse “hate your enemy” in the entire Old Testament.

That is why Jesus says, “you have heard” *not* what was written in the Law.

And, “love your neighbor” is a specific quote from Leviticus chapter nineteen verse eighteen.

Matter of the fact, verse seventeen says the opposite.

¹⁷ “*You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.*” ¹⁸ *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord*”. Leviticus 19:17-18

Now, can we say that the teaching of the Pharisees was without any scripture? No, we cannot. Because, in the history of Israel, God himself told the people of Israel to exterminate the Canaanites. This was an injunction for a specific time but not a command for all Jews or all Christians at all times. Another area that might be an issue for believers are some Psalms that call for the destruction of an enemy. For example, in Psalm 55, the Psalmist prays that God would take out his friend who had betrayed him. “*Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.*”

And there are a few other Psalms that speak this way about enemies. Psalm 7, 35, 55, 58, 69 and others.

What should we say about these Psalms? Is hatred warranty, even against our enemies?

The answer in all these situations is to defer to God and look at it judicially not individually.
(I have to credit to Martyn Lloyd Jones for helping me understand the application of the Law.)

So Jesus, in verse forty-three is merely stating the distortion of the Law that the teachers were promoting during their day. Perhaps, another part of recent history to consider. The Crusades. They were directly in contradiction to the teaching of Christ.

Now, Jesus does not call us to absolute pacifism but to non-retaliation against individuals.

And beginning in verse forty-three, Jesus launches into this teaching about loving our enemies.
To help us understand this passage, I have broken it down into three major observations.

First observation:

God's purpose in loving others including your enemies.

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.*

God's purpose for you as a disciple is in verse forty-five. Love and pray for your enemies *so that* you may be children of God. *That* you may be sons and daughters of God.

The NASB says it better than the ESV.

"so that you may prove yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven".

Jesus means that this is what true children of God do. God will distinguish those who are his children by their love for others. They will be called sons and daughters of God.

Do you love only those who love you back? What about those who don't? And those who hate and even persecute you?

And, you are already a child of God by being a disciple. So, act like one. This is in line with what we have seen before in the Beatitudes.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The children of God are those who make peace. Those who help end conflict not those who create conflict. Those who bring reconciliation.

And the children of God are those who *rejoice* when you speak the truth and you are persecuted for the truth. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven.

You know whose company you join when you live this way?

You join the heritage of the prophets of old. They spoke God's truth and faced all kinds of hostility from others. Ultimately you join with Jesus himself who is the last and final prophet, priest and king.

Second observation:

Jesus' command.

⁴⁴ *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..*

This is the command of our Lord to his disciples. Another way to translate his verse is simply "*Keep loving and praying for your enemies*".

Now, a question that some people might ask. Maybe you have this question as well.

Well, I don't have any enemies. I always get along with everyone. I always agree with everyone.

You see that can be an issue. Yes, we are called to live at peace with all but not everyone will agree with you when you live as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

1. Maybe you have not spoken the truth in a way that convicts. We need to speak the truth in love but speak the truth regardless. Let love be at the forefront but let truth not be compromised.
2. Maybe you have held to a certain Biblical conviction but you were not willing to speak the truth to avoid conflict. I have been hearing that some preachers are self-censoring because they fear the backlash from their own communities. Certainly, I am not exempt. All the free speech we have can quickly be labeled as hate speech because you have held to the standard of Jesus.
3. Or, maybe you don't have a formed conviction about what Jesus tells us to stand up for.

Consider what Jesus says in Matthew chapter ten.

³⁴ *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Think about it this way. If our Lord agreed with the Pharisees and the Roman authorities, he would not have gone to the Cross. Even Pilate said to Jesus that he had power to release him. And yet Jesus told Pilate, “I have come to witness to the truth”.

You can make an enemy by simply speaking the truth. Not because you want to make enemies but because of the nature of truth.

And how are we to love an enemy?

Let’s see what God told the Israelites how to treat an enemy.

⁴“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”. Exodus 23:4-5

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ 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. Romans 12:19-21

C.S Lewis has a very practical suggestion on how to love others. The great preacher James Montgomery Boice says this suggestion was very helpful to him. I think it is great help. Here it is.

“Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, if you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less..The difference between a Christian and the worldly man is not that the worldly man has only affections or ‘likings’ and the Christian has only ‘charity’. The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he ‘likes’ them; the Christian trying to treat every one kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on – including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning”.

Third observation:

Why love others?

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

The first reason to love others is because your Heavenly Father is far more gracious and merciful than you and I. If you knew some of injustices that happen in this world and you had the power to give what people deserve, perhaps you and I would not be as kind. But God has all the power. And God knows all. And yet, He makes the sun rise on those who do evil and those who don’t. He sends rain on the just and the unjust. So, if God who knows all and sees all and is still so gracious, those who say they are his children ought to conduct themselves like his children. In the Gospel of John chapter eight, Jesus has a

showdown, a confrontation with the Pharisees about their claim that God was their Father. And here what Jesus had to say to them.

“We have one Father—even God.” ⁴² *Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. John 8:41-42*

Jesus would rather have the actions of his disciples prove their statements than make statements and their actions disprove the statements.

But Jesus goes a step further with the Pharisees.

⁴⁴ *You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.* ⁴⁵ *But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.*

God is the Father of Truth. There is no variation in God. And his children are to embody the character of their Father.

Second reason to love others: A heavenly reward.

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?*

Jesus talks about two groups to give reasons why we should do more.

The first group is the tax collectors. There were low rung Jewish people serving under Roman bosses. And they were a tightly knit group who collected money from their own community to pay the Romans bosses. And of course they would love each other because they are all stealing from the common public. It's like a gang known for looting others. And the gang members are all in friendship with each other but they can't be friends with outsiders because all they do is steal. Jesus says that this is not a difficult thing to do. You exclude everyone else and stay within your group. That is not a disciple.

The second group is the Gentiles – non-Jewish people. They greet each other.

The disciples ought to do more. Break out of your mold. Greet someone not like you. Love someone unlike you.

The prophet Elisha is a great example of showing kindness to the enemy. There was a time when the king of Samaria was attacking Israel. And the Lord gave Samaria into the hands of Elisha.

²¹ *As soon as the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, “My father, shall I strike them down? Shall I strike them down?”* ²² *He answered, “You shall not strike them down. Would you strike down those whom you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master.”* ²³ *So he prepared for them a great feast, and when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the Syrians did not come again on raids into the land of Israel. 2 Kings 6:21-23*

----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: **Love Your Enemies.** Matthew 5:43-48

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. As disciples of Jesus Christ, what is God's purpose for us in loving others including enemies?
Matthew 5: 45, Acts 14:16-17, Ephesians 5:1, Philippians 2:15,

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. Do you believe Jesus' teaching to love others is a suggestion or a command? Go around and share how you can love others?
3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

1. For personal reflection: What will you do differently to love others more so that you live out your life as a disciple of Christ? Anyone that you need to reconcile with or make amends or go beyond loving those who love you?