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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**November 22, 2015**

**Loving the Hard to Love, Part 2**

**Matthew 5:45-53**

**Prayer:** *Father, again, I just, I lift up Leon and I just thank you for him and I thank you for what a hard worker and what a -- just a bright, cheerful voice he was all the time that he was here and now he's struggling, and so we just continue to lift him up and pray that you would give great grace and great strength and peace and power to him and that his rehab would be successful and that he would be able to reclaim -- he would be able to reclaim his voice. I pray this in Jesus' name. And Lord again this morning I just thank you, as we open up your book that you would again continue to give us the grace and the strength and the wisdom that we need particularly through the power of your Holy Spirit. Give us the ability to understand the words that are written in your book and not just to understand them but to have the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction and to make them a permanent part of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, last week we were -- we're looking now at the very final phase, the very final response of Jesus to the Pharisees in which

they presented their view and Jesus contrasts it with his. Jesus in this chapter, we're looking at Matthew 5, he's already taken on the Pharisees' ideas about anger and lust and divorce and false oaths and an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and in each case, Jesus, he quotes their understanding of the law as a means of achieving some kind of righteousness before God, and then he compares that with this -- with his insistence that this law that they're speaking about is an impossible standard, something that's not possible for human beings to follow because it reflects and it mirrors God's perfection. So Jesus is quoting their rules again and again by saying, "You have heard it said" and then he counters those same rules by saying, "But I say." And then he restates the rule but he restates it in a way that's even harsher than they had stated it originally. The Pharisees say, "You must not commit adultery." Jesus says that's what they say but I say to even look at a woman with lust in your heart is to commit adultery. The Pharisees would say, "You must not murder," and Jesus says to be angry with your brother is on the same par as committing murder. And what Jesus was doing, he's raising up the bar that the Pharisees had set artificially low. And what he's basically saying is that in order to satisfy God's law, you have to be just like God. You have to be transcendentally flawlessly perfect. Can't do that. But that's why God says in *Romans 3:23*: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* What Jesus is doing in this

discussion in Matthew 5 is he's putting into words what falling short looks like. And he does it to counter the claims of the Pharisees, that righteousness could be had simply by following their rules. Jesus knew that the only way to get right with God is not by rule keeping but by accepting by faith the gift of God's son sent to provide the means of making up for our moral shortfall.

*Romans 3:23 says: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Now this last part of the sermon that we've been looking at expands on the idea of how we are interact -- how to interact with one another, and once again Jesus is basically blowing the Pharisees' notions out of the water. In this final section that we're looking at, Jesus is proposing a radically different approach to treating those who mistreat us. It's in *Matthew 5:43-45*. 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, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

Once again on the surface this looks like an impossible task, and so we've been looking to Jesus to see how he himself did it, how he

indeed blessed those who cursed him when he sat down to eat with the very Pharisees who had accused him of casting out a demon by the power of Satan himself. We look to Jesus to see how he actually did good for those who hated him by ministering to crowds who he knew would eventually betray him, and that at the height of that betrayal as he's being crucified, we see Jesus proving that he would indeed pray for those who persecute him as he says in *Luke 23*: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" And we looked at how Jesus could accept these injustices that we saw. The reason why Jesus was able to love his enemies was because he trusted his heavenly Father to provide the justice that he knew only God could provide. And so he perfectly acted out what the scripture says in *1 Peter 2:22* which says: *He -- this is Jesus -- He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.* See Jesus knew, he knew that God's perfect justice demanded that every single person receive his just due and that in the end there's nobody who is ever going to escape justice. And that's true for Christians also. There is justice for Christians, but it falls on the head of Jesus instead of on them. And he is our supreme example. God says in the area of justice, he is the one who's going to take it. He is the one to whom vengeance is supplied. He is the one that is going to be the one who does it

well and does it properly. He says repeatedly that he is much better at it than we are. In *Romans 12* he says: *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." 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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Well this morning we want to look at this second part of this last section of the sermon. We're going to look at Jesus' teaching on loving those who are hard to love. So let's look at the whole statement that Jesus made. This is *Matthew 5:43-48*: Jesus says: *"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 makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

What Jesus is doing is he's restating the Pharisees' teaching which was love your neighbor and hate your enemy. And right in the center of that discussion he throws in a statement that is absolutely critical for Christians to digest, to understand. In fact, if you don't get what Jesus is saying here, I can guarantee you that your Christian experience is going to at some point be a disaster. See, as we read this you see Jesus is -- first of all, he's exhorting us to be like his Father. He tells us to *love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.* And what Jesus is saying is that just as the Father gives his blessings without conditions, well so too we are to bless, do good, and pray without any conditions as well. But he's also telling us something much deeper about the nature of his unconditional love. Jesus says in verse 45: "*For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*" That's not fair. You know, there's no question that anybody with eyes and ears, they can readily discern the fact that in this world there are all kinds of bad things that happen to good people and all kinds of good things that happen to bad people, and God acknowledges as much when he says that both good folks and bad folks receive the rising sun and the nurturing rains. For many of us that's just plain offensive. I mean we're used to thinking of God as -- as at least being willing

to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil and after all the scripture that I spoke about last week says this, *Romans 2:9* says: *There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.*

Okay. The struggle with that verse here is trying to understand it in terms of what it's intending to say, and the problem is one of chronology. You see, when Jesus says that God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike, he's speaking about this present existence that every one of us are stuck in. When he's speaking about tribulation and glory and honor versus those terrible things that'll happen to evildoers, he's speaking about future judgments. See, this is not a world where bad guys live in perpetual drought and darkness and good guys live in perpetual rains with lush lawns and suntans. God says militant atheists and born again believers are both going to experience the blessings of sunshine and rain in this life. So whether you're Billy Graham or whether you're Bill Maher, you're still going to enjoy what God has given to all of us. On the surface there's an awful lot of us who would say well, that's really not fair. But if you think about it, this is the way it must be. You see, if there was a specific inherent earthly blessing with a guarantee for anybody that if he

was to join the Christian belief and to put his worship into -- on Jesus, if he was to put his faith in Jesus, if belonging to the church had all of these kind of earthbound blessings, then we'd have to have one of those ticket machines that they have at Shop Rite to stop the crowds that would be gathering at the beginning of the church, they'd be wanting to get in. Everybody would want to be part of this. You see, if there was a specific advantage in this life alone to becoming a Christian, you would be crazy not to become one. If giving my life to Jesus meant that I now have a leg up on health and wealth and prosperity, then common sense instead of the Holy Spirit would make me a Christian. *He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust* declares there's no inherent earthly advantage to becoming a Christian. And quite frankly, that flies in the face of a lot of teaching today.

I don't know if you know who Creflo Dollar is, he's the author of a book called *Total Life Prosperity*. He's the fellow who just launched a \$65 million campaign to purchase an updated private jet to replace the private jet that whisks him and his family around now. He offers no apologies whatsoever, and he summarizes his gospel this way. This is a gospel that thousands and thousands of people believe today. He says: "Biblical prosperity is the ability to be in control of every circumstance and situation that



occurs in your life. No matter what happens, whether financial, social, physical, marital, spiritual, or emotional, this type of prosperity enables you to maintain control in every situation." I look at that, say really? Jesus said in *John 16*: "*In the world you will have tribulation.*" Paul said in *2 Corinthians*: *For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. And then we have Peter who said: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. And then James who says: Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. And so if you have to choose between the gospel of Creflo Dollar and the gospel of Peter, Paul, James, and Jesus, I think we'll go with them. They paint a far different picture than the prosperity gospel paints, and what they're saying is this: Life is hard and it's not fair, but God is good. And sometimes you will see the worst kind of people getting the best kinds of deals and the best kind of people getting the worst kind of deals because life is not even remotely fair. That's one of the reasons why Jesus said, "*In this world you will have**

*tribulation.*" Now I would also add that it wasn't even remotely fair that the king, the creator and sustainer of the universe would be despised, rejected and crucified, but Jesus accepted life's unfairness knowing that in the end God would make all things right. And that's what has to sustain us.

I have a dear friend who struggles with infertility and she just happened to be in a position to see many, many young people who are abusive, who are drug addicts or unbelievably irresponsible bearing their fourth, fifth, and sixth child and the picture just doesn't compute. You know, why would God deny her the ability to bear a child she so desperately wants when she's surrounded by all of these irresponsible, uncaring people who are having babies like it's going out of style? And she loves Jesus and they couldn't care less. You know, why is it that God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust, and I suggest it's because the playing field of blessings between Christians and non-Christians must be completely level or else people would move not in the direction of Christ but in the direction of those blessings. I mean that's exactly what happened when God blessed the people with the loaves and fishes. They attracted huge crowds, they all started to gather around Jesus not because they cared who he was but because they were interested in what he could do. It was the earliest form of the prosperity

gospel and Jesus would have none of it. In *John 6:26* it says:  
*Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."* And what Jesus was saying, what he recognized and they didn't was that you can have a full belly and still be on your way to hell if you place all of your umph in the temporal blessings instead of in Christ. He says, *"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you."* Now Jesus made an even starker distinction at the very beginning of Mark's gospel. *Mark 1:32* says this, it says: *That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."*

I want you to get a picture of what's taking place here. Jesus is healing, the word has spread and crowds are gathering, there's enormous crowds, and these crowds are made up of people who are desperate for healing. It's still dark, morning has not even broken and there's these huge crowds, and Jesus' response to that need is to leave before dawn. *And he said to them, "Let's go on to the next towns, that I might preach there also, for that is why I came out."* You look at that, you say isn't that cruel? That's heartless. And it is if you think healing is all that Jesus is about. You see, physical life, as important as that was to Jesus, was so far down the list of what was eternally important compared to their eternal lives, that Jesus' response to those who couldn't see the difference was to leave. Well, that same principle applies to us today. You see, if we found some special dispensation from life's difficulty by becoming a Christian, we would flock to that door and leave that door to eternal -- leave the door to eternal life completely untouched. And that's why God says the good and the bad in life are not distributed on the basis of what we deserve. Becoming a Christian does not confer on you any escape whatsoever from the potential disasters of life. In fact, chances are actually pretty good that many aspects of your life are going to grow more difficult the closer you draw to Christ. Paul said in *2 Timothy 3:12: Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* And so we have to bear in mind

over and over and over again that God never once promised us that becoming a Christian would enable us to go around life's trials and difficulties. What he said is that he would walk us through them. *Isaiah 43* says: *But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."* What God is saying is when you pass through the flood and the fire, I will be there with you. That's a far cry from suggesting what the prosperity gospel suggests, that Christianity is a ticket out of those trials. When David said in *Psalms 23*: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.* He didn't say it because now I'm in control because of I'm a child of the King. No, instead he said what Christ has promised to all of us, he said: *I will fear no evil for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* See, there's a huge difference between trusting God to go through all of life's difficulty with you and believing in a mythological gospel that says somehow turning my life over to Christ gives me the right to a trouble-free existence, full of health, wealth and prosperity. He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust because otherwise we'd all be jumping on the same

earthbound bandwagon.

What about *Romans 2:9* which says: *There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.* Well, the key is "there will be." That scripture doesn't necessarily apply to the life that all of us have to live now. You see, every one of the scriptures that Jesus and James and Peter and Paul cited, they speak of struggle, they speak of trials and difficulties in this life as preparing us for glory, honor, and peace in the next. And in fact the only way to really survive the vicissitudes of life is by having a split screen version of what this life is about, a split screen that sees half of this kingdom and half of the kingdom to come. By the way, that word "vicissitude," isn't that a neat word? Have you ever heard that word? Vicissitude, that's a fifty cent word. You know what it means? It sums up the human condition so nicely. It is a word that refers to a change in circumstance never for the good, never for the better. You know, vicissitudes happen to every single living thing, human and animal alike, but there's a huge difference between humans and animals because animals never think about vicissitudes. They just go through them. We think about them all the time. We dwell on them while we're in them and we fear them

when we're out of them, which is why Jesus said in *Matthew 6*:

*"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

*Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."*

So yes, God does cause the sun and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike and sometimes that will be a source of bewilderment and a source of pain, but Jesus, like Paul, says the solution to that bewilderment is a commitment to see through kingdom eyes, to *seek ye first the kingdom of God*. No one understood that better than Paul, I mean, in his life, we all know he knew beatings and floggings and stonings and shipwreck and starvation and betrayal and he had more heartache than any ten lives put together and yet it was Paul who said in *2 Corinthians 4*: *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

I want to put this all into context of what Jesus is saying here. Remember, what he's trying to teach us here, he's opposing the Pharisees' view of love your neighbor and hate your enemy and he's doing that by saying: *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."* So what he's doing now is he's proposing a radically different way of understanding how we are to live our lives as Christians. He says we are to bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us, pray for those who persecute us so that we can be imitators of God himself, *"for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."* Jesus is going on to say that this life is not going to be fair, and sometimes good guys get bad stuff and bad guys get good stuff but then he ups the ante considerably. He says in the very next verse, verse 46, he says: *"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

This is tough stuff. Understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying loving the loveable is a piece of cake. It's something that requires no effort at all and it lines up perfectly with the Pharisees' understanding of you shall love your neighbor and hate



your enemy, but Jesus isn't asking us to love the lovely. In fact he's asking us to do the exact opposite. He says love the cursers, love the haters, love the persecutors.

Again, let me just put this into perspective. Just take for a second in your own mind a mental picture, and it could be a personal acquaintance, somebody you know, somebody you heard about, somebody that you read, someone who makes your blood boil, someone who fills you with disgust and revulsion. You do that? That easy or hard? It's probably easy. Just focus in on that person for a moment and ask yourself this question: For Christ's sake, am I willing to love -- and just fill in the blank, because that's what Jesus is insisting on. See, I think we get up -- we get hung up on this idea of love as romance because in our culture that's the only way that we understand love. Love is warm fuzzies, period. But that's not at all the way Jesus understood love. In fact he gave us a concrete example of what he considers to be love in action, and it's a story virtually everyone has heard and everybody knows. It's the story of the good Samaritan. Now we've all heard the story but it's very important to get the context in which Jesus told it to understand what he was getting at.

I had mentioned before that Jesus demonstrated his love for those who hate him in the way that he ministered to the Pharisees, to --

quote -- "his enemies," and they were constantly trying to trip him up, they were constantly looking for ways to accumulate enough damning evidence so that they could have him arrested, tried and executed and yet he still repeatedly did good to them. He did good in his teaching and in his actions. And this story is no exception. See, the story of the good Samaritan starts out with a conversation. This is Luke 10. It says: *And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."* And he said to him, *"You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."* But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, *"And who is my neighbor?"* Well, you know the kind of answer the Pharisees would have given, they would have given him a five-point subset, subset, subset, here's who your neighbor is in this condition, in this condition, in this condition. Well, Jesus dispels with all of that and he simply responds by telling a story. Verse 30 says: *Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and*

*saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion."*

Now Jesus is careful to paint a picture of religious leaders acting the way religious leaders typically acted in that day. The priest not only does nothing, he goes to the other side to avoid any possibility of contamination should he accidentally touch the victim. Well, Jesus touched victims all the time. Jesus experienced that -- quote -- "ceremonial defilement" all the time and he puts in context how horrified they all were every time Jesus reached out and touched somebody who had a disease. Now the Levite who's again a religiously protected class, he does the exact same thing, he passes by on the other side of the road. And finally, we all know the story, a Samaritan stops and he has compassion. But you know, we have grown so used to this idea of the good Samaritan that we don't really understand it in context -- in the context of the way Jesus was saying it. He was making an outrageous statement. You see, to his hearer's ears, the words "good" and "Samaritan" never, never went together. The hatred of the Jews for the Samaritans was profound, and on every single level, Samaritans were considered the scum of the earth. They were the exact people that the Pharisees could be expected to exemplify when they meant saying -- when they meant "love your neighbor but hate your enemy."

These were the ones that you're supposed to hate. Now we don't really have a single word to describe what they used with the word "Samaritan" today. You know, it may be for us something that conjures up a horror, maybe an ISIS commander or something like that. You know, the only way I can put this into any context would be to put it into 21st century parlance would be to say a Samaritan might be an AIDS-infected transvestite drug addict. I mean, picture the most outrageously terrible person that you can think of and it differs from person to person, and then picture that person stopping and having compassion. Jesus says: *"He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the inn keeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'* Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, *"The one who showed him mercy."* And Jesus said to him, *"You go, and do likewise."*

You know, someone has pointed out once again the brilliance of Jesus and the hatred of the Pharisees towards Jesus and the Samaritans and everything that they stood for. You got to remember, this story starts out with a person trying to justify himself. It ends up with Jesus trapping that very person into

identifying the very persons they detested as the only ones who practiced genuine love. See, the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan" which is right where Jesus had maneuvered him when Jesus said to him, *"Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"* Well, the lawyer is forced to say "The one who showed him mercy." He couldn't say "Samaritan." *And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."* Imagine the sting of those words when Jesus tells a vaunted religious leader who can't even speak the name that he needs to learn how to follow the righteousness of this Samaritan.

See, once again, Jesus is brilliantly doing three things: Number one, he is countering the Pharisees' false ideas of love and hate; number two, he's instructing all of those within earshot as to what it means to truly love; and number three, he's loving even these miserable teachers by taking the time and the effort to illustrate and demonstrate to them what God's understanding of love is. And as repulsive as the Samaritans were to the Jews, my guess was so was the Pharisees and their attitudes to Jesus. And yet Jesus never let that stop him from loving them, and he's telling us what true love is and what true love does. And what's unique about the story that he tells is the victim is unconscious, and by making the victim the object of the Samaritan's love, somebody who's not even

conscious, Jesus removes entirely the idea of love as an emotion or love as warm fuzzies. I mean, the Samaritan doesn't even have the opportunity to feel either affection or revulsion for someone who has no ability to reciprocate. We don't know if he was a Jew. Maybe he would have woken up in the middle and said, "Get your filthy Samaritan hands off me." And so by making the victim unconscious, Jesus is focusing in on love not as what you feel but as what you do. The closest that I can come, I was just trying to think of what a present day example of somebody who demonstrates that kind of love would be an EMT, a volunteer EMT coming to an accident scene where somebody's drunk and belligerent and cursing him out and ministering to that person. That's about as close as I can get. That's basically what he's talking about. It's love that's not emotion, it's love that is action; it's what you do. Jesus is telling us that warm fuzzies have nothing whatsoever to do with love. But this is what brings it home to you and me. What he's saying is it is incredibly easy to confuse the love that we have for our friends and our families and those who think like us to be the love that Jesus expects of us. It's not. In fact that kind of love is utterly without merit in Jesus's eyes, not because it's worthless but because it's a love that virtually everyone, from pagan to believer, is capable of. In verse 46 he says: *"If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"* You know, tax collectors were

people who were held in absolute contempt by the Jews. You know, these were fellow Jews who would contract with the Roman government to deliver a certain amount of money for which they received the right to extract whatever they could from the poor people that they had to get that money from. And they were considered greedy traitors who for the sake of money would turn on their fellow Jews. So Jesus is taking what for many is the only love they have ever expressed and equating it with love expressed by tax collectors. Jesus is saying loving the loveable counts for virtually nothing. We say what? I mean, we live in a culture that has reduced love to its lowest common denominator and that is warm fuzzies. And we're so used to loving people that we feel good about loving and not loving people we don't really like, that those words hit us like a ton of bricks. Because in essence we've signed on to the Pharisees' teaching, "love your neighbor but hate your enemy," and Jesus is absolutely unimpressed with that love. He says: *"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."*

So who are our enemies? That's the first question. Okay. Who is our enemies? Well, let's see, is it gay folks? Is it pro-choicers? Is it marriage equality folks? Is it ISIS? Is it the Syrian refugees? I mean, these folks are just the surface that

Jesus is expecting us to scratch. There's also deeply personal enemies that every one of us have. There's people who have slighted us, gossiped about us, lied to us, and sought to gain somehow at our expense. It doesn't matter if you're in kindergarten or if you're a senior citizen, you will accumulate people around you who are out to gain something somehow at your expense. These are the people that Jesus is honing in on. And what he's proposing is so radically different than what we're used to that we seldom really hear what he's saying. He's saying loving the loveable simply doesn't count in my economy. *"If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"*

So Jesus is calling on us to radically re-examine who we love, how we love, and why we love. And he is challenging us to ask ourselves to love people we would never, ever consider loving before. And it's not by having warm fuzzies for them, it's by doing whatever is necessary to further their well-being. You know, for the good Samaritan it was medical and financial care, care dictated not by an emotional response by the Samaritan but by the need of the victim. And for us, the greatest need that any of our victims have is their need for the gospel. Jesus addressed that need with his life. He expects us to do the same, not because we have to but because we are sons of his Father, so it should be



natural.

Jesus goes on to sum up all of this in one devastating sentence, verse 48: *"You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."* Now all Jesus is asking of us is that we be just like he is, perfect in every way. And we all know that that's absolutely impossible. And so we see Jesus taking the command to love and pushing it to its logical extreme, and we can only acknowledge at this point what we can't do, and so we say Jesus, we cannot be perfect. But Jesus can and he is. And it's his perfection that is given to us when we by faith place our faith in what he has done for us on the cross. You see, what he's saying is look, loving your enemies is an impossible task. It requires miraculous power. If you have -- if you are one of his, that power already resides inside you. Why? Because Christ is inside you. You just have to ask for it. Now if you don't know Jesus, I would love you to come on up front, I'd love to talk to you about what it means to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. We would love to show you how that power can be yours.

*"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 makes the sun rise on the evil and on the*

good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Let's pray.

Father God, we just wilt under the demand that I've just read: You must be perfect. We can't do that. I thank you, Lord, that we have a God who is perfect, who can be perfect and who can confer on us that perfection by faith, by faith in what he has done on the cross. Father God, thank you for that, thank you for the power that resides within us by your Holy Spirit. Give us the ability, Lord, when it comes to love to focus in on those people that we would never even imagine trying to love and begin the process of applying your miraculous power to seeking their well-being, not the warm fuzzies, but the well-being and that well-being ends always with the cross, with the kingdom and with the gospel. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.