

Introduction

We are back this morning to our study of Jesus' great sermon on the mount.

[Read Text and Pray]

Once again Jesus is working to correct error in the minds of his listeners to set the record straight about the kingdom of heaven.

I want you to see . . .

I. The Lies of the False Teachers

A. For the sixth and final time in his sermon, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said." He is pointing to the teaching that was spread among the populace by the Pharisees and scribes.

We have seen that the scribes and Pharisees were relaxing the law of God all over the place: in regard to anger, lust, divorce, truthfulness, and retaliation. They were also misrepresenting the law of God in regard to love.

B. Here is what they were saying: "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. When you simply look at the Old Testament, you see that there is something wrong with both aspects of what they were saying.

1. The problem with saying, "love your neighbor," is with what they did not say. "Love your neighbor" leaves out something important. Leviticus 19:18 says, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"As yourself" is important. It is a standard. It is the measure of one's love. It is the character of how one loves. There is a difference between loving your neighbor and loving your neighbor as yourself. You could care for another person as long as it does not infringe on the care you exercise for yourself. It is not unusual for people to throw coins in the salvation army

kettle or take cast-offs to Good Will. But loving a neighbor as myself . . . that is reflected in Paul's direction to the Philippians when he said, "in humility count others more significant than yourself."

The standard for real love and real care is how you love and care for yourself. However, the false teachers had conveniently left that out, because that is not so easy. The flesh has real problems with that.

Learning how to love yourself is not the greatest love of all. It is the most natural of all. Learning how to love others as you love yourself, now that is love. But the Pharisees and scribes relaxed God's instruction down to something that was attainable in the flesh. They brought it down to a standard for which human beings might give themselves a pat on the back.

2. The second half of the statement also clearly violates the scripture. "Hate your enemies." Now that's a novel attitude!

Hate is a strong word. Despise. Hold in contempt. Abhor. Loathe. These all express the disposition the Pharisees and scribes were teaching they had an obligation to express toward their enemies.

Now if we are honest about the Bible, there are some places in which hate of certain persons is presented as legitimate. I was reading just this week in Psalm 31. David says there in verse 6, "I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols." He also speaks in Psalm 139:21-22: "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 complete hatred; I count them my enemies."

Furthermore, the Old Testament sometimes condones human killing of people groups. When God sent his people Israel into the promised land, He commanded them to wipe out the inhabitants of the land. They were to show no mercy. These Old Testament realities are somewhat perplexing. It would seem that there are circumstances in which hate is right. And yet, there are a couple points to bear in mind which clarify things.

First, the hate that is expressed is not the hatred of personal enemies but of the enemies of God. It is hate of idolaters. David hates those who hate

God. So this is not hate of a person for personal wrongs they have done against me. It is not a prejudicial hate of someone because of the color of their skin or the accent with which they speak. It is a hate that is focused on a person for their enmity and hostility and resistance toward God. It springs from a love for justice and righteousness. This frame of mind is fueled to defend the honor and glory of God and ultimately rejoice in the destruction of his enemies.

But here and now we must also say that it is a hate that is permeated with mercy. David prayed at the conclusion of Psalm 139, just after one of his declarative statements of hate, that God would search his heart and know his thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in him. There is a righteous indignation toward the enemies of God, but there is also a mercy and pity toward these that longs for their repentance. It is reflected in God. He hates the sinner. Psalm 5 declares that the Lord "hates all evildoers"; he "abhor[s] the bloodthirsty and sinful man." But while he hates the sinner he also extends mercy to the sinner. He has compassion on him. It is not because men are righteous in and of themselves that they obtain God's compassion. It is because God is love. In that 5th Psalm, right after declaring God's hate for the evildoer, David declares that he will enter the presence of the Lord "through the abundance of [his] steadfast love."

Second, the ruthless way in which Israel was to destroy the Canaanites does not justify personal hatred because God was using the Israelites to judge the nations who filled the land because of their extreme sin. God obliterated Sodom and Gomorrah to judge them for their sin, and he used Israel to judge the Canaanites. This is not an example of hatred for being a personal nuisance, but rather it is an example of the fact that these wicked peoples had exhausted the patience of God.

Whether they appealed to the law and the prophets or simply to their flesh, the problem with the scribes and Pharisees in their teaching was that they justified hatred of people whom they considered to be their enemies.

And who were these enemies? Gentiles? You bet. It is said that the Romans believed the Jews hated everyone besides themselves. A saying of the Pharisees declared that if a Gentile was in trouble a Jew should not help

him because he is not a neighbor. A look at the NT reveals that the Pharisees held in contempt not only Gentiles but also Jews of certain kinds. They despised common sinners and tax-gatherers. They despised the common people who followed Jesus. They despised Jesus because he mixed with the riffraff. Basically, if you were a Pharisee then you were a neighbor, but if you weren't as good as a Pharisee or you stood in the way of their happiness, then you were their enemy. And in their minds, they were right to hate you.

Is this not the way of the world in general? Love those who love you. Treat kindly those who treat you kindly. Say hi to those who say hi to you. Do unto others as they have done unto you. Everyone who nice to you is your neighbor. Love them. And everyone who is not nice to you is your enemy. Hate them. That's what the religious elites in Judea were saying.

II. The Contrasting Instruction of Jesus

Jesus declares that what these teachers were saying is completely wrong. He indicates a striking contrast, speaking with the authority of God. "But I say to you . . ." He is the authoritative teacher who will not relax the commandments of the law. He will fulfill them. And the citizens of the kingdom will reflect them. His contrasting instruction sets forth who to love, how to love, and why to love like this.

A. Who to love. Jesus gives the imperative, "But I say to you, Love your ENEMIES."

This Sermon on the Mount has overflowed with shocking and surprising statements. And this statement was no less stunning to the crowd before him than any of the others. Love your enemies? John MacArthur says this "is the most powerful teaching in Scripture about the meaning of love. The love that God commands of his people is love so great that it even embraces enemies." William Hendriksen states, "When [Jesus] said, 'I tell you, love your enemies,' he must have startled his audience, for he was saying something that probably never before had been said so succinctly, positively, and forcefully."

This teaching was no doubt greeted with resistance and skepticism by those who heard Jesus then. The same resistance and skepticism is no doubt present today. Why is that? When people talk about who and what they love, they speak of what is attractive to them, who is nice to them, who is desirable, what makes them feel good about themselves, and who really cares about them. We love those who love us. It is with this idea of love that a person might say, "I am in love with you," and the next day, "I don't love you any more." What they mean is you do not do for me any longer what you did for me. This thing or this person no longer provides a jolt to my sense of self-worth. Love in that way is fleshly; it is based on performance, on merit. It can come and go with the wind.

And this is part of what is wrong with the world. This is why marriages fail. This is why people choose not to get married. It is why friends come and go. It is even why people in the church come and go. The love with which Jesus tells us to love is not this way. God tells us to love our enemies. This love is different than fleshly. It does not look through the lens of what someone does or doesn't do for me but what a person needs.

This is one of the points Jesus highlighted with his parable of the Good Samaritan. Here is this man who has been robbed and beaten by thieves and left for dead. A priest sees him but walks the other way, and a Levite does the same. But of all people, a hated Samaritan sees the man. Unlike the other two, however, he has compassion. He loves. He goes and gives him first aid and takes him to someone who will nurse him back to health and pays the bill.

Does that not sound just like Jesus. Does that not epitomize the love of God? In Romans 5, Paul describes the love of God. He says, that to find someone to die for a good person would be hard enough, "but God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." He looked at our faults. He looked at our defiance. He looked at our stubbornness. He smelled our stench. He felt our hostility, our enmity. The Lord God heard our temper-tantrums. He saw our fists clenched in defiance. The Mighty God felt the demand for holy justice within his own being. And yet . . . he did not pass by on the other side. He came to our rescue! He appointed his own holy Son to supply the payment necessary

for life to replace death, and by his stripes he heals our sinful souls. Friends, brothers and sisters, this is love. It is not what you do for me. It is what I do for you. 1 John 3:16 affirms, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life, for us." If you do not know Jesus, you do not know love, and if you do not love like Jesus, you do not love.

B. How to love. Jesus not only says we are to love our enemies. He also give a couple examples of what that looks like, and thereby he shows us how to love.

1. The first example is prayer. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. One of the greatest ways you can act out love is prayer. Richard Wurmbbrand exhibited this powerfully during his imprisonment in Romania. What a powerful testimony we saw in that clip earlier this morning. Here is a man beaten cruelly and brutally and persistently for praying in his prison cell. On that one occasion the officer bursts into his cell citing the fact that Richard's wife was put in a work camp and his child was made an orphan, what else could he possibly be praying for, he asks. "I was praying for you."

When you go before the God of the universe to ask him to do good, to have mercy, to meet needs, to change the heart of your enemy, that is love. This is a great demonstration of love for any one. To pray for a person is to love them. One of the lessons that arises out of the greater lesson on love is the lesson of how important prayer is. We need to be a praying people. Today we are reminded to pray for the persecuted church around the world. We demonstrate love for brothers and sisters in Christ as we lift them up before heaven's throne asking God to sustain them, to supply their needs, to cause their joy to abound, and to deliver them. But we also demonstrate love as we pray for the persecutors, the ones afflicting the hearts of the saints with pain and oppression. We love them when we pray for God to free them from their hate, to open their eyes, to remove the darkness and foolishness from their hearts. We love them when we look beyond their hostility to their hearts and see the wrath of God hanging over them. We see their need for Christ. We love them when we cry out that God would save them.

And it is not just persecutors who are doing so to try to stamp out Christians from the earth whom we are called to love and to pray for. It is that person at your place of work who loves to pull your string, that family member who constantly wants to drag you into conflict and steal your happiness. Jesus calls us to love even our enemies, those who bring trouble into our lives. And one of the first things that means is prayer. Love them through prayer.

2. The second example of loving your enemies is through common kindness. Jesus talks about how God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, how he sends rain on the just and the unjust. God demonstrates love to the entire world every morning with the rising of the sun. Through rain and sunshine he supplies the needs for plants to grow and food to be supplied with tastes that excite the tongues he also gave us.

We love our enemies through being kind like the good Samaritan. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him water. Minister to his needs. These are acts of love.

3. The third example of how to love our enemies is the one that has really been on my mind this week. Jesus talks about greetings: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?" Do you ever think about how you greet people as being an act of love?

It seemed sort of strange to me until I thought about it. Okay so your walking on the sidewalk and 100 feet away you see another person also walking on the sidewalk coming in your direction. When the 100 feet turns into fifteen feet, you have a choice to make. To greet or not to greet. If they lift their eyes to you and say, "hi," more than likely you will do the same. But what if you notice that they are intentionally diverting their attention off in the opposite direction or seemingly staring far off so as not to have to acknowledge you. What then?

What is a greeting anyway? Is it not a kind acknowledgment of someone's presence? It is a polite word, a sign of welcome, an expression of good will. At base a greeting is an expression of the love Jesus is talking about

because it expresses good will, a hope for a good day, disposition of desiring what is good for that person.

Greetings do a person good. They encourage. There is one person I would imagine most everybody in this room knows. That's Kathleen Case. She calls herself the hugger. I get a hug from Kathleen almost every Sunday. And I see her walk up to total strangers and wrap her arms around them to let them know they are welcome. Human beings can make a big difference by loving people in little ways.

C. And that brings us to "Why to love like this."

I see three reasons here.

1. Loving like this demonstrates your sonship. When you love your enemies, you love like God loves. And when you love like God, it marks you out as his child. If you do not love like this, you are not of God. If you are a child of God by faith in Christ, then love even your enemies, because he tells you to. You love him and you want to glorify him by obeying him. But love your enemies because you love God and you want to imitate him. Love your enemies because you want them to see God's love in you.

2. Why love like this? Second because when you love your enemies, it differentiates you from the world. Everybody loves those who love them. What is amazing about that? Where is the power in that? Where is mercy and grace in that? But when you love the unlovely, the annoying, the offensive, the persecutor, that is staggeringly, amazingly, and wonderfully demonstrative that you are not ruled by the prince of the power of the air. No, you bow to the prince of peace. You are not conformed to this world, but are transformed to reflect God's good and acceptable will.

3. Why love like this? Demonstrates your sonship. Differentiates yourself from the world. And third, Directs yourself to the target. The target is to be like God. Jesus says, "You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Conclusion

We all fail. We all miss the mark. But that does not mean we should not shoot at it. All my kids have bows. Ariail has one. Philip has one. Even my

daughter-in-law, Ellie has one. Philip got his first deer using a bow just a month or so ago. He called us all full of excitement and overflowing with energy when he made the kill. Well he has been taking Ellie with him for several weeks. Hours and hours they have sat in a strategic spot. Philip wanted Ellie to get her one too. Well this week a deer came along. Ellie raised the bow and let the arrow fly once, twice, three times and missed the mark every time. Oh man you know how you feel when the big one gets away. I am not telling this story to in any way embarrass my daughter-in-law. I am amazed. I wouldn't go out there for 10 minutes, don't even know how to shoot a bow. I think it is amazing a wife would spend that kind of time with her husband in his area of interest. I have no doubt Philip's heart swells to see his wife shooting at the same target at which he shoots.

Jesus culminates this part of his sermon by pointing us to the target at which every human being should aim. You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. We all miss the mark. It is an impossible mark. We are born not even shooting in the right direction. None of us is even close to being perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. We are born loving ourselves and living for ourselves. We are breakers of God's law from our very hearts. We fail the test. The cross of Christ is all about procuring forgiveness for this failure. The only way to meet the requirement of God's perfection is in Christ.

But even after being reconciled with God and coming into citizenship of the kingdom of heaven, we still miss the mark of perfection every day. But that should not keep us from aiming at the target. Jesus nailed it. He hit the righteousness of God right in the bullseye. He loved his enemies and laid down his life for them. And even though we fail, even though we miss, that is the target at which kingdom citizens are called to aim every day, to the delight and glory of God.