

How to Love Your Enemies

Righteousness & Relationships Part 16

Matthew 5:44-48 7-18-10

Summary: Love your enemies in order to have a greater experience of sonship, and to receive reward. Enemy love involves loss; the promise that God will repay makes up for that loss and assures us of justice. It is a matter of faith. Express that faith by praying for your enemy and greeting your enemy. What makes us different is the fact that God is our standard and our motivation.

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Matthew 5:43 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Introduction

For all those people knew it would be a day just like any other day. There is a man in His early thirties, standing on a hillside and preaching a sermon to His disciples. But just about half-way through this sermon He uttered a sentence that rattled the whole world. This sentence was so powerful and called for an ethic so high and so far above what any other religion ever taught that it has kept the attention of the world and amazed humanity for two thousand years.

Matthew 5:43 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Right at the very moment I was typing that last sentence on Thursday morning I got an email asking for prayer for a pastor near the area where Dave and Carolyn are working in Russia. His enemies had been publicly slandering him for months through the media, and finally last Thursday, as he was leaving a prayer meeting, they shot him in the head. And if that pastor survived Jesus' word to him would have been to love those people who did that.

Selfless love

That is a shock and a jolt to this world because this love runs so counter to the very nature of their kind of love. Their love is based mainly on selfishness. Put yourself first, then worry about loving others.¹ But putting yourself first and then loving others runs into a brick wall when someone slaps you on the cheek. Jesus calls for a kind of love that requires crucifying self. This kind of love is utterly impossible for the world. And at first glance it seems impossible for us. How do you obey a command like that?

Who is your enemy?

Before we talk about how, let's make sure we know what Jesus means by the word **enemy**. Jesus defines that word here with a very wide range – everything from those who are persecuting you to those you do not feel like greeting. Someone shoots you in the head – that is an enemy. You see someone coming and you don't really feel like smiling at them or giving them a warm, happy greeting – that is an enemy. And everything in between. It is anybody with whom you have any kind of hard relations.

It might be someone close who has hurt you, or it might be someone you never met. There are Democrats who cannot even say the name “George W. Bush” without clenching their teeth. And Republicans who would throw a party if President Obama fell down into a bottomless pit somewhere. But if we are going to obey Christ we had better love George Bush and Barak Obama.

The Motivation

How do we obey a command like this? It seems impossible for us just to squeeze out a warm, friendly greeting to certain people, much less love someone who smears you with lies in the media and then shoots you in the head. So how do we do this?

What kind of motivation would be powerful enough to move the heart to love like this? Ted Engstrom tells the story of an American tourist who was passing by a leprosarium, and saw a lovely young missionary cleaning the putrid sores of a leprous beggar prior to his entering the leprosarium. It was so revolting and disgusting to the man that he could not even take any pictures. And in his disgust he said, “I wouldn't do that for a million dollars.” To which the young woman responded, “Neither would I.” She was doing it because she had a motivation more compelling than a million dollars. Loving like God loves requires an incredibly high and powerful motivation.

There might be someone who is causing you so much pain right now that even if someone paid you a million dollars you would not be able to love them. But Jesus gives us a motive that is so much more compelling than a million dollars that it is enough to move us to love anyone. Actually He gives us two motivations. The first one is in verse 45.

Sonship

Matthew 5:44 Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

Jesus made a similar comment earlier in the sermon.

Matthew 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

If you are a peacemaker you will be identified as being like God because God is by nature a peacemaker. Instead of moving away from hostility, it is God's way to move *toward* a hostile, broken relationship and create peace. And so the motivation for being like that – moving toward a broken

¹ Some have tried to import the world's kind of love into the Church through the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” They say, “We are to love others as we love ourselves, therefore we must first learn to love ourselves better so that we can love others better.” And so they turn it into a command for self-love. But that is the world's approach. Jesus did not command us to love ourselves; He assumed we already do love ourselves. If some people did not love themselves Jesus never would have pointed to self-love as the standard for loving others.

relationship to reconcile it rather than retreating – is the promise that in doing so I will be acting like a son of God.

Confidence

And the fact that we already are sons of God means this is possible for us. We *ought* to love our enemies in the same way a peach *ought* to be sweet. It is the living out of what God designed us to be. The temptation is to think, “I don’t think I’m capable of this. I can’t do it.” That is like a hammer missing a nail and saying, “I just don’t know if I’m cut out for driving nails.” You are cut out for it. Your new nature was designed by God for this kind of love.

Experiencing the benefits of sonship

As believers we are already His sons and daughters, but the more we act in ways consistent with our status as sons, the more we can experience the fatherhood of God in a greater way. Sonship is a wonderful thing that comes with countless blessings and benefits. But when we behave like we are not His children we distance ourselves from those blessings and benefits. The more we act like sons the greater our experience of Him as Father and the more we enjoy benefits of sonship.

The dignity of doing His work

What are those benefits? Well, for one thing we get the dignity and fulfillment that come from knowing that our work is important work (because it is the very activity of God).

Assurance of salvation

Another benefit of sonship is assurance of salvation.

1 John 4:7 Love is of God and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

If you are truly saved it is vitally important that you be extremely confident that you are saved so you can relate to God properly, and you get that assurance when you love with God-like love, because only saved people love that way.

Experiencing His love

A third benefit of sonship is the experience of God’s love flowing through you. When I position myself in between God and my enemy so that the love of God comes from the heart of God and passes through me in order to get to that person, I have flowing through me something that is of infinite worth. Part of our problem is we think our love comes from us – so we do not think of it as being all that valuable. But if you are aware that it is coming from God you will actually be undergoing a personal encounter with God when you love your enemy.

Reward

So that is one motivation the Lord gives us – love your enemy in order to experience sonship in a greater way. The other motive is reward.

Matthew 5:46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

The only love that is appropriate is the kind of love God rewards. And there is a special emphasis in Scripture on the fact that God rewards love for enemies.

Proverbs 25:21-22 If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. 22 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

We need reward because loving enemies means loss

I believe one reason why reward is emphasized so much for loving enemies is because loving our enemies usually involves some kind of loss. We saw that in verses 39-42. If someone feels wronged by you and would like to sue you – showing love to that person might mean giving them even more than what they think they have coming. That is going to cost you some money. If they insult you, love turns the other cheek. That is going to cost you some dignity. If an authority requires something of you, love may require you offer more than what is legally mandated. That is going to cost you some freedom. If someone commandeers forty minutes of your time, showing love might mean giving them an hour and a half. That is going to cost you some time.

Loving enemies is always costly. At the very least it always costs your right to revenge or bitterness – which can feel like the greatest loss of all sometimes. There is something in us that loves to cling to anger and resentment. Someone hurts us, our heart wraps around a grudge like a python around its prey, and if someone tries to pry your fingers loose from that anger everything in you resists. It is a strange kind of sin because it does not bring us any pleasure, and yet we refuse to let it go. Your heart just digs in its heels and says, “They hurt me and I am NOT going to let go of it.” Something inside you wants to hang on to that grudge, and loving your enemy will cost you that grudge. It will require that you just let it go and get nothing in return.

Sometimes we hold a grudge over someone as a kind of deposit, waiting for the person to make things right. “I’m going to stay cool toward you until you say you’re sorry.” We will let go of our bitterness only in exchange for that other person confessing his sin or doing something to make it right. We are keeping it as leverage. But love requires that you give it up for nothing. You get nothing in return, and now you have no bargaining chip – no leverage. So for you it is just a loss.

That is why we are so reluctant to do it. We do not want to love because of what we are going to lose. It might be as small as losing face, or losing an argument – or losing your chance to get in the last word. Or it might be as big as losing your life. And it always involves the loss of your right to revenge.

So God, in His grace, promises reward. “Don’t worry about what you are going to lose. Whatever you lose, I will more than repay.” Any time obeying or serving God costs you something God will restore that loss times ten thousand.

Trust God’s justice

God will repay you and your enemy. He will repay you for what you lose by loving your enemy, and He will repay your enemy with wrath for his sin. That verse I read about the hot coals in Proverbs 25 is quoted by Paul in Romans 12.

Romans 12:17-21 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Burning coals usually represent God’s wrath or punishment in Scripture. You do not have to be a theologian to know that having hot coals heaped on your head would involve a lot of pain. If you love your enemy he will experience pain from God. How that pain effects the person will vary. For some it will just be punishment. For others it will bring repentance and have a cleansing, purifying effect. The effect that your kindness has is between that person and God. That is not in your control. What is in your control is your love. You love your enemy; let God worry about what impact that does or does not have.

But that only works if you refrain from vengeance yourself.

Romans 12:19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Literally it says, **Give place to God's wrath.** When we retaliate in some way we crowd out God's wrath.

Now, we need to be careful here. This is not saying that you give your enemy a cup of cold water in the hopes that God will zap him with lightning. In fact, Scripture warns that if we rejoice when God punishes our enemy, God will stop punishing them.

Proverbs 24:17-18 Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, 18 or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him.

It is never appropriate for us to be glad at someone else's suffering. Some politician you cannot stand gets into trouble **do not let your heart rejoice.** That is interesting – your heart wants to rejoice and you have to step in and say to your own heart, “No, I will not permit you to feel happy over my enemy falling into trouble.”

We do not rejoice over their pain, however we do delight in what God is accomplishing. God's vengeance is perfect vengeance. Unlike our vengeance God knows exactly how much, what kind, at what time, and for how long to do it for it to have the best possible impact. God is so much better at this than we are. It is tragic when we crowd out His wrath with our petty little wrath – because His is effective and ours is not. And all it takes to crowd out His wrath is for us to simply be happy that the person is being punished.

When you think, I have to give my husband the silent treatment, or shut him out of the bedroom or give him the cold shoulder – I have to give him some consequence otherwise he will never learn – when we do that we are crowding out the effectiveness of God's retribution. We are muddying the waters with our own retribution which is nowhere near as effective as God's retribution. You are not going to change anyone's heart by giving them the cold shoulder or the silent treatment.

So you can see that loving your enemies is all about faith. You have to have total assurance and absolute certainty about two things: 1) that God will do a good job repaying that person for the wrong done to you, and 2) that God can be trusted to repay you for everything you lose by showing love. If there is any doubt in your mind of either one of those, you are not going to be able to love your enemy. If we find we cannot love our enemies it means either we do not love God very much, so His love for them has no impact on our hearts, or we do not really trust God to repay us for what we will lose, or we do not trust His vengeance to be better than ours. And so loving our enemies is all about loving God and trusting God.

“I just can't. You don't understand how badly I've been hurt. Nobody knows how much I've been hurt!” – that is unbelief talking. God knows, and cares, and His knowing and caring is a far greater thing than every human being on the planet knowing and caring.

“But he's getting away with it. He has everyone deceived. Everyone thinks he's such a great guy – no one knows the truth.” God knows, and He will make it right in His time.

Or maybe you have had a conflict with someone and that person seems to have come out on top even though he was in the wrong. And now he is happy and you are miserable. A guy dumps his wife and he is off partying with some bimbo and all his friends and here you sit all alone, drowning in debt.

This text is for you. We can say with the writer of Psalm four, “**You are the God of my righteousness.** Everything in my life that is right is from You, God, and everything that is not right will be made right. I do not have to step in and assist You in punishing sin – You can handle that all by Yourself and I trust You to do so.”

If you let go of that anger; if you loosen your grip on the bitterness and just let go of all of it and just lay it all down – it does not get lost. If you will lay it down God will pick it up.

Romans 12:19 It is Mine to avenge and I will repay says the Lord.

Justice will be done on both ends – the Lord will punish the person who sinned and will repay you one thousand times for everything you lost. “But what if the person is a believer – or becomes a believer and God forgives his sin?” Justice will still be done – the wrath just goes on Jesus, but justice is still done.

And because of that promise you can lay down your anger right now, this morning, and walk out of here with a HUGE burden lifted off your shoulders. Because God can be trusted to make things right you can take all your bitterness and anxiety and just leave it right there in the chair and walk out of here a free man or woman – free to love. And the misery of vengefulness and resentment can be replaced with the painful joy of love.

So how do you love your enemy? One word – faith. You are motivated by your desire to have a greater experience of sonship, and you have absolute certainty that God will make it worth your while and will repay you a thousand fold for anything you lose (and will repay your enemy with wrath for what they have done if they do not repent). It is all faith. As John Piper said, “Hold a grudge; doubt the Judge.

The Method

Prayer

So the “how to” is faith. Now let’s look at two specific expressions of that faith. We have the motivation; now let’s look at the method. The first comes in verse 44.

Matthew 5:44 pray for those who persecute you

The starting point in loving your enemy (or anyone else) is praying for them. Now, this is not talking about an imprecatory prayer. When Jesus says pray for those who persecute you He does not mean, “Dear God, please smite that person with cancer.” It is talking about praying for blessing. Like Stephen and Jesus who pleaded with God to have mercy on their murderers while they were in the very act of murdering. We pray for God to bless them. And if what they are doing is so wicked that we know God is not likely to bless them we pray, “Dear God, please remove anything that would prevent You from blessing him. Do whatever it takes to place him into a position where You can bless him.”

That is the desire of love. And it must be a real desire, because if it is not then it is not really a prayer. Prayer is expressing to God the desire of your heart. Just saying the words, “God bless so and so” is not automatically a prayer. It is not a prayer unless it is the desire of your heart.² Jesus is not talking about writing the person’s name on a list and then rattling off that name as you crank out all your required prayers. He is saying, “Want blessing for the person so much that you ask God for it.” Praying for your enemy is an action of love because it arises out of a genuine desire for your enemy’s wellbeing. Your enemy is in trouble with God. Praying for your enemy means taking a stand next to your enemy and pleading to God on his behalf. You position yourself between your enemy and God and beseech God to have mercy on him or her.

² When God sits in heaven and listens to prayers what He is listening to is not sound waves. It is desires. The sound waves out of your mouth go one hundred feet and then dissipate into the air. But the desires of your heart rise all the way up to heaven. **Psalm 10:17 You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted** When God hears a prayer what He hears is the desire.

Did you know your desires make a sound in heaven? What you say with your mouth is not the prayer – the craving of your heart is the prayer. That is one reason why evil desires are so evil – they are a kind of blasphemous prayer because God hears our desires. But when we desire good things it becomes a powerful prayer that moves the heart of God.

This is an important principle for any prayer. Next hour we will all go to our small groups and commit to pray for someone all week this week. When you pray for your person much of the effectiveness of your prayer will come from how strong your desire is that God answer the prayer.

“I’m still not convinced about the emotional part – all I see here is action, not emotion.” Fine, if you do not see it here let me show it to you in Romans 12. At the end of Romans 12 Paul says the same thing Jesus is saying here.

Romans 12:19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

Exactly the same thing Jesus is saying here in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact Paul even mentions persecution in verse 14.

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Do you know what it means to bless someone? Do you know what part of you blesses and curses? I will give you a hint – it is not the mouth.

Job 31:20 His heart did not bless me

Job 1:5 Perhaps my children have ... cursed God in their hearts.

Blessing and cursing are a function of the heart.³ They are a wish. When I wish that God would grant you favor, that is a blessing. When I wish He would punish you, that is a curse. Blessing and cursing have to do with what you want.

You see, it is not enough to simply hold yourself back from taking revenge; we are not even allowed to *want* revenge. With God the issue is always the heart.

And if you still do not see it look at the next sentence.

Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Why do we need a command to tell us to do that? Why would I be reluctant to rejoice with someone who is happy? Because I do not like it that they are happy. They have been persecuting me and hurting me and now they just got a big bonus at work and my clutch just went out. And they are laughing it up, and I am not naturally inclined to laugh along with them because I do not like it that they are happy.

The same with weeping. They slandered me, lied about me, hurt me, mocked me, then their clutch went out and I am not naturally inclined to shed tears over that. In fact the natural impulse of my flesh is to be glad. And that is why I need Proverbs to tell me...

Proverbs 24:17 when your enemy stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice

You cannot eliminate emotion from this. I will admit that the emphasis is on action. The Lord knows we are going to struggle with the emotions and He wants us to be clear about our responsibility with the actions while we are trying to get the emotions in place. So if the feelings are not there – go ahead and obey with your actions. But do not ever be content to just leave it there.

Deuteronomy 15:10 Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you

³ What if someone utters a blessing with his mouth that does not match what is in his heart? If they do that they are like the wicked people in Psalm 62. **Psalm 62:4 With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse.**

Reveals the heart (not done for show)

So the command to pray is a command directed at the heart, not just the mouth. And one of the reasons that is such an important expression of love is because you know it is not done for show. You do it in the privacy of your own heart. You can give a cup of cold water just to impress the people around you, but the desires of your heart that rise to heaven are invisible to all but God, so it is a good test of genuineness. How much do you love your enemy? Easy to test – how earnest are your prayers for God to bless him?

The only way to reach them

Another thing about prayer is it is an act of love that you can always do. You may not be able to give money or time or whatever it is the person needs, but you can always pray. In fact, sometimes it is the only thing you can do. If you hardly ever see the person, or if he lives out of state, or in the White House, or in a cave in Afghanistan, the only way to reach him is through God. So praying for your enemy is an action of air-mailing your love to that person via heaven. It is an anonymous gift sent via air mail (or more accurately, prayer mail).

Helps change your heart

So praying is an expression of love. But it is not just an *expression* of love – the very act of praying usually *increases* love. William Barclay has a great statement: “We cannot go on hating another man in the presence of God.” You cannot draw near to God and continue to hate a person God deeply loves.

If you love your wife, and one of your friends hates her, and that guy comes over to your house for dinner, something is going to have to give. He cannot come to your house and hate your wife and simultaneously enjoy close fellowship with you. But if that friend really loves you and really wants to be close to you in friendship, he will allow your love for your wife to warm his heart toward your wife. We struggle to love our enemies because we fix our attention on the ugliness of their sin rather than on the gloriousness of the love of Christ. Prayer forces you to spend time thinking about Christ’s love for that person.

And it also reminds you of Christ’s love for you while you were still His enemy. I cannot imagine loving a mosquito, and yet a mosquito is a marvelous and beautiful creature compared to what I was when God first loved me. No mosquito ever disobeyed or dishonored or rebelled against or blasphemed God. I did all that. A mosquito is morally neutral; I was desperately wicked, and God loved me while I was yet His enemy.

So the more I draw near to God and express the tiny little glimmer of love that is in my heart, the more that very act of earnest, heartfelt praying will grow itself into greater and deeper love.

Pray for the love

“But what if I don’t have even a glimmer of love to start with?” No matter what is in your heart you can pray for God to bless the person. And while you’re doing that, ask God to give you love for the person.

And pray hard. When something is really important to you, you pray earnestly for it. If you are really, genuinely desperate for something from God; you don’t pray for it every morning. You pray for it every ten minutes. If you are lacking love in your heart for your spouse or your friend or your relative or your enemy or whoever, try stepping up the urgency of your prayers as you plead with God to give you love for that person. If asking God every morning to put love in your heart for that person is not working, do it every hour. And if that is not working try every five minutes. Keep cranking up the intensity of your prayers until the Lord answers. Then when it happens it will be clear to you that the love came from God, not you.

Greeting

So we are motivated to love because we want a greater experience of sonship and because of the promise of reward. We trust God as Rewarder and Judge. And one expression of that faith is prayer-mailing your love to the person by crying out to God on his behalf. Then Jesus gives us another specific action in verse 47.

Matthew 5:47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

We are different from the pagans because we greet our enemies. I love that – Jesus brings up greeting. This is the Sermon on the Mount – famous for its impossibly high ethical standards. We might expect Jesus to say, “Lay down your life for your enemy. Be willing to take a bullet for him.” But instead He brings up something that most people would say is about the easiest expression of love there is – a greeting. Why does Jesus give us something that is so easy?

One reason may be to expose how unloving our hearts really are. Giving a greeting costs you nothing, and yet when someone has really hurt you, it seems impossible. They hurt you, they have not apologized, they are oblivious to what they are doing, and you haven’t taken revenge, you haven’t yelled and screamed at them, you haven’t cussed them out or punched them in the nose – you have been very civil and controlled; but now you see him walking toward you and you are going to go out of your way to establish eye contact and initiate a friendly greeting? When all other forms of retaliation have been taken away, a cold shoulder is all you have left. A warm, loving greeting is just going to make them continue to think nothing is wrong.

I think if we ask Jesus why He picked something so easy He may very well say, “If you think it’s so easy then just do it. Once you get that down then I’ll give you something a little harder.”

Another reason Jesus may have had in mind is the role greetings play in our lives. Greetings are important. Do you realize that greetings are your only point of contact with most of the people you encounter? There are a handful of people you will talk to in depth today, or eat a meal with, or do some recreation with – but the vast majority of people you will have no interaction at all except for a greeting.

Isn’t it true that your relationship with many people in this church consists one hundred percent in greetings? You never really talk at length or have any other interaction with them. That is the way it is by God’s design, and so greetings are of great importance.

And if you are like me and you are an introvert and you do not have many people skills, that is no excuse to disobey God. This is like prayer – it is something anyone can do. Even an introvert can smile and give a friendly greeting. You may not be able to keep a conversation going for more than twenty seconds, but a warm greeting only takes a moment and anyone can do it.

We need to teach that to our kids. I think one of the most common mistakes parents make is in allowing their children to be rude in the area of greetings. When my kids were little someone would say hi to them at church and they would look at the floor or run behind my leg and I would say, “Oh, she’s just being shy.” Finally someone pointed out to me, “She may be being shy, but she’s also being rude.” So I taught them to always respond to a greeting. We should not let our children be rude, because according to 1 Corinthians 3 love is not rude. It is not that hard to respond to a greeting. Even a child with no people skills whatsoever can be taught when an adult says, “Oh, what a pretty dress,” to make eye contact and smile and say, “Thank you.”

But if we use shyness as an excuse to be unloving in the area of a greeting for our children, we will tend to think it is a valid excuse for us as adults too if we happen to be shy by nature. But love will give a warm greeting – not only to friends, but to *everyone*, including enemies.

It is important to understand that Jesus is commanding us to love everyone, but that does not mean we are to love everyone the same. God does not love everyone the same, and neither should we. He does

cause the sun to rise on the evil and the good, but He does not adopt everyone into His family or give everyone His Holy Spirit.

And He has commanded us to have a special love for fellow believers. The “one another” commands are between brothers and sisters in Christ. Some forms of love have to be reserved only for those closest to you, and other forms of love can go out to everyone. Greetings are one of those forms of love that can be like the sun and the rain is for the Father. It can be indiscriminate. It does not take time away from your family, it does not threaten to put you in bankruptcy, it does not rob you of time for ministry – it is a kind of love that you are perfectly free to give freely to all without any distinction.

Conclusion

God is the standard

Love your enemy in order to have a greater experience of the Fatherhood of God. How do you do it? By faith in His promise of reward and justice. What are some practical expressions of that faith? Pray for your enemy and always give him or her a warm greeting. Jesus closes this portion of the Sermon on the Mount with a **therefore**:

Matthew 5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This verse causes a lot of confusion for people because of that word **perfect**. I think the key to understanding this verse is to realize where Jesus placed the emphasis. We naturally zero in on the word **perfect**, but in the Greek the whole emphasis is on the word **you**. The word **you** is essentially repeated twice.⁴ So Jesus says, “**YOU** – you be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” And if you want to know the significance of that just look at the context.

Matthew 5:46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 YOU therefore, you be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus is making an emphatic contrast between you and them. They have a certain standard for loving, but you – you must be different.

The word translated **perfect** generally refers to something being the way it should be. What Jesus is saying is, “When you think about what you are supposed to be – the standard that dictates all morals and ethics, for you that standard is very different than what the world has for its standard. For you the standard for the way you should be is your Father in heaven. They draw their norms from each other, but you – you draw your norms from your Father. They decide what is moral and immoral or good or evil or right or wrong based on the standards of people. But you – you determine right and wrong and good and bad based on the character and desires of God.”⁵

⁴ Because of the way Greek verbs work, the word “you” is not even necessary because the second person plural verb already means “you be perfect.”

But Jesus adds another word for “you,”

⁵ This marks a fundamental difference in our entire approach to ethics compared to the world. We measure everything by the character of God. They don’t. They do not really have any consistent standard for ethics. The person who rejects the authority of God has absolutely no basis for believing there is such a thing as right and wrong. If you talk to an atheist and say, “Is it OK if someone breaks into your house and beats you to a pulp and takes all your stuff?” they will say, “No, that’s wrong.” But if you ask, “Why is it wrong? What makes it wrong?” they have no way of answering that question.

Sometimes they try to say, “It’s wrong because it hurts someone. We should never do anything to hurt people.” But that doesn’t work. First of all, who says hurting people is wrong? By what authority is that the standard? Some people think it’s fine to hurt people, so who is to say they are wrong and you are right?

That is one thing that makes us so different. And if we are not different we are not His disciples. Verse 47 is clear – if we love like they do – if there is no real difference between the way we love and the way the Mormons love, or the Jews, or the Catholics, or the nice guy who lives down the street from you who does not know Christ, or Mother Teresa – if our love is not far greater than theirs, it is not Christian love. And what makes it greater is the fact that God’s love is our motive and our standard.

If you measure yourself by the norms of the culture and come up good – you come out as basically a good person by societal standards – that means nothing. Our standard is not the norms of society, but the character of God.

So what have we learned in chapter 5 about how to interpret and apply the Law? The Law is not mainly a matter of legislative restraints or concessions for hard heartedness or regulation of behavior. The Law is a neon sign pointing to the perfections and excellencies of the most wonderful being in existence that we might have the joy and privilege of moving in the direction of being more and more like Him. And that is a joy and privilege because the way God is is the best way to be. It is the most delightful and joyful existence possible. So the closer you get to being like He is, the better off you are.

Love your enemies!

Several years ago I traveled to India, and while I was there I bumped into someone in the airport who told me a shocking story about his co-worker. His co-worker was the guy I had already heard about in the news who had recently been burned to death with his two little boys because they were Christians. It happened in the State of Orissa, which is adjacent to the State I was in (V.A.). The man’s name was Graham Staines. He left his home in Australia, and took his family to India to bring the gospel to that nation. He had spent thirty-four years serving the people of India in the name of Jesus. In January of 1999 he and his two little boys were mobbed by some radical Hindus. Phillip was 10 years old. Timothy was 6. The angry mob trapped them in their car, and then set it on fire. We can only imagine what it was like for those two little guys to see their car surrounded by this mob. Graham grabbed his little 6 year old and 10 year old and the three of them huddled together as the mob set the car on fire and all three burned to death for the name of Christ.

But the *death* of a martyr is never the end of the story – it is always the beginning. The response of this man’s wife had a powerful impact on many in India and around the world. They interviewed her on TV just a few days after the murder of her husband and two little boys. Here is what she said: “I have only one message for the people of India. I’m not bitter. Neither am I angry. But I have one great desire: that each citizen of this country should establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who gave his life for their sins . . . let us burn hatred and spread the flame of Christ’s love.”

Everyone thought she would move back to Australia. She said, “My husband and our children have sacrificed their lives for this nation; India is my home. I hope to be here and continue to serve the needy.” That couple did not just have the two boys; they also had a daughter – Esther. She was the oldest – 13

And beyond that, some hurting is good. A surgeon hurts you when he cuts you open. And if someone is trying to murder your children, and you tackle him to save their lives, and while tackling him he gets a bruise – now you have hurt him. So are you being immoral? Hurting or not hurting cannot be the standard for right and wrong.

From there they will usually say, “It’s wrong when society agrees it’s wrong.” But that can’t be the standard, because that would mean when society thought slavery of blacks in the United States was OK, then it was perfectly moral. Or when the Chinese thought foot binding was OK, then it was right just because the society accepted it. And when a particular society thinks cannibalism or murder is OK, then for them it is OK. In Muslim society horrific treatment of women is considered perfectly OK, but most people in our culture would say that entire culture is mistaken about that. So clearly it is possible for an entire culture to be wrong about a moral issue, which means the consensus of the culture cannot be what makes something right or wrong.

The fact is, if you reject the authority of God as the standard of right and wrong you are left with no standard. That is clear even to some unbelievers. One philosopher even said, “There is no defensible standard for right and wrong. But we must pretend there is such a thing as right and wrong for society to survive.” So he said there is no such thing as right and wrong but we have to act like there is just so we can live life. The world has no rational, defensible standard for the existence of morality and right and wrong, and yet they have to pretend there is some standard for society to even exist.

But when you are pretending, that does not bring you to a very high standard. You end up with a system that allows most everything you really want to do, which is why ninety-nine percent of the people you will ever meet think they are basically good. But that is not our standard.

years old. The TV reporter asked for her thoughts as well. Her daddy and her two little brothers were burned alive a few days before, and here is what she said: "I praise the Lord that He found my father worthy to die for Him." That is the love that goes beyond the love of the tax collectors and pagans and Pharisees. Brothers and sisters, for the sake of the name and renown of the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, love your enemies.

Benediction: Ephesians 3:17-19 I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.