

Loving Our Enemies... Are You Serious?

Matthew 5:43-48

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Good morning. It's a blessing and a privilege to be with you here this morning. If you have a Bible with you, I'm going to invite you to turn with me to Matthew 5:43-48. I know that the text is going to be on the screen above me here. So, you can follow along there if you don't have your own text. But as you're turning there, I do want to say that it's been a real joy and privilege for the past several days to be with the pastoral staff as well as the administrative staff here at CPC. And then I got to spend yesterday morning with your trustees. And I know that in the next several weeks it will become "official" with the joining of the PCA. Let me be one of the first folks to just welcome you all and say, it really is exciting for us to be partnering together in ministry. Just the several days that I've been with Randy and the trustees, I'm excited for what you all will be teaching us and what we can do together for the glory of Christ and for the advancement of His kingdom. So, thank you.

Also, as Randy mentioned, Stephanie, my wife, and I have known Randy and Kate since the mid '90s which makes us old. But the older I get, the more I like that, I think. And I just want to encourage you all. I've been in ordained ministry for 21 years. I've been in ministry vocationally for 25 years. And it's an encouragement for me to go places where I know people that are serving as pastors who are faithful. They love their people. They have a longing and a desire to see their church grow in grace. They're hardworking. They're faithful stewards. And they are continuing to grow deeper in their understanding of Jesus's love for them. And so, you all have that kind of pastor not just in Randy, but in PD, and John is younger but he's the same. And so, I want to encourage you all with that. That is a blessing and I'm thankful for it.

Well, this morning's passage, as Wayne has done a great job laying out for us already in many ways, is a text from the sermon on the mount. And the passage that we're reading this morning is coming to us kind of as a capstone text of a larger section of the sermon on the mount. It's been in a section that began in Matthew 5:20 where Jesus begins that section with, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom," and then He goes through and five times He makes the statement, "You have heard that it has been said. But I say to you." And what He's doing is He's piling on. He says, if you want me to illustrate the righteousness that I'm speaking of, I'm going to talk about anger, I'm going to talk about lust, I'm talking about forgiveness. And He's just piling on.

And then we come to this text to love our enemies, and we're going to end the reading this morning with that really painful statement for some of us, "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." I don't know about you, but every time I come to that, I go: ugh. For a moment.

You know, the 20th century atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell grew up in a Christian home and he actually wrote on this passage. And Bertrand Russell's comments about this text in Matthew 5:43-48, he said this, "The Christian principle 'love your enemies' is good. There is nothing to be said against it except that it is too difficult for most of us to practice sincerely." Right? I heard somebody say, amen. That's right. Is that what you and I think about the passage this morning?

You see, if you're a Christian or not a Christian this morning, that passage is going to stir something in your heart. And I would submit to you that Jesus intends for this text to actually be sweet and beautiful and glorious for us. It's designed to be a text that brings us joy. And so, my question is, how is He going to do that for us this morning? So, with that in mind, I'm going to go ahead and pray, read the text, and then we'll get to work.

Let's pray together.

Father, we come to this passage, and I just thank you for your word. You tell us that it is sharper than a double-edged sword, and so, we ask that you would wield that blade this morning with great

tenderness and care, that with one sweep of the blade you would expose our hearts to ourselves and that with a second sweep that you would apply the healing balm of the gospel. That we would find in the words of Jesus this morning words of life, words of hope, words of joy. Father, I pray that you'd be in my head and on my lips, that you'd be on my heart and on my tongue, the words I speak this morning would be your truth for the glory of Christ and for the building up of your church. I pray it in Jesus's name. Amen.

With that little introduction, hear now God's holy and inspired word from Matthew 5 beginning in verse 43, we read this.

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.
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord.

Well, some of you may be familiar with the video historian Ken Burns. He's done a ton of various documentaries on what seems like virtually every topic under the sun from baseball to jazz to the Civil War to the national park system. And in 2017, his documentary on the Vietnam War came out. And it took him ten years to film it. It was a ten-part mini series that was released on PBS and it was 18 hours long. And in it, Ken Burns captures in a unique way just the whole experience of the '60s. It's on the Vietnam War, but it really is about a painful time in our nation's history, perhaps the most painful in the last 70 years.

And what's so compelling about the documentary is the volume of interviews that Ken Burns gets. One commentator, when speaking about it, said this. He says the Vietnam War documentary "is the deepest exploration yet of the origins, the fighting, and the fall-out of a conflict that virtually defined the '60s and the first of its kind to let 'the enemy' speak at length alongside familiar American voices including Pentagon policy wonks, Army privates, anti-war protestors, grieving parents."

There's even a moment in the mini series in which a woman which they call a hero mother talks about losing her eight brothers and two sons to ground combat and bombings. It's the sort of devastating testimonial about the personal toll of conflict that you might see in any war documentary. But this grieving woman was a Vietcong soldier. She was one of dozens of north Vietnamese citizens that Burns and Novick interviewed for the film. And when she mournfully describes losing her children on the verge of victory in 1975, her voice helps reshape a narrative that's almost always been told as an American tragedy. "When we talk about Vietnam, we talk about ourselves," Ken Burns says. "But that's only half the story. The people we fought deserve to tell their half for the first time."

Now, when that came out in 2017, there was a lot of talk about this. And when I sat down and watched it for the first time, you need to understand where I come from. Both of my grandfathers were Korean military officers, my father was a Korean military officer, my father-in-law flew in Vietnam. I went to a military institute. I served on active duty. So, I'm all for the military. And as I sat there and watched, I thought, my dad spent two years in country, and these folks were trying to shoot his plane and helicopter down. What do I do with that?

And Ken Burns pressed me for the first time to hear their stories not as my enemy, but as men and women made in the image of God with dignity and honor. That they had value. And the documentary challenged me to see my enemies as people just like me.

Now, in the passage this morning, Jesus is coming to us and He's telling us to love our enemies. As one commentator aptly said, "None of us can go through life without collecting a group of individuals who would not be sorry to learn that we have died." And the older I get, the more true that statement feels to me. If you're young, you're like, I don't have people that hate me. Trust me, it'll happen. It will.

And how we deal with those people who feel that the world would be a better place without us is certainly a part of what Jesus is hammering home. But I don't know about you. When I come to this passage in my own devotional life, and I jump into it, and I hear Jesus say that I've got to love my enemies, I begin to think, who are the enemies? There are certainly a handful of people there. But I often get sidetracked because the folks I struggle to love the most aren't necessarily those who seek to do me harm or persecute me as the text says. They seem to be the people closest to me, my four children, my wife, my co-workers, even the person in the left lane on 95 driving slowly. It still is a struggle for me after all these years.

I think it's easy for me to read the passage and go, I got to love my enemies; okay, there's three people that I still feel like are enemies, Lord, I need to wrestle with you – and that is important. But I miss the opportunity that I think Jesus is pressing in here which this whole worship service has been highlighting, and that is this. The problem is that because of the condition of my heart of stone prior to a work of the gospel, I take neighbors and friends and family, and I turn them into enemies. And Jesus is saying, don't you understand? I take even your enemies and make them friends. And apart from the work of my spirit, you are going to take your friends and turn them into neighbors.

So, I'm doing as I often do in the Scriptures, that greater to lesser thing. I'm telling you to love your enemies and everyone else in your life. And that's going to be hard. It's going to be hard for you and me for this very reason, because of our human condition as we've read and we've talked, the reason we pray the Lord's prayer and say, "Your kingdom come and your will be done" is because you and I wake up every morning and think, my kingdom come, my will be done. And everybody in my life that gets in my way, they've just become an enemy. And Jesus is saying, don't you understand? The gospel comes in and breathes life and hope and joy in your heart and changes you and changes me. Now, I can say, your kingdom is better, your love is deeper, your hope is stronger.

And so, what I think Jesus is laying out for us in this text is challenging us to understand this divine love that he speaks of in the text, and He does so through three things. He's going to give us a definition of this divine love, and then He's going to show us the direction of the divine love, and then He's going to speak to what it means for us to dwell in this love. So, the definition, the direction, and the dwelling. Let's jump right in.

I want you to see in the text what He says in verses 43 and 44. He makes this statement, "You've heard it 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." The language, the word that Jesus uses there, in the Greek is the divine word for love.

We're still in the month of February, the month of love. And so, the problem with the word "love" for us culturally is we use it for so many things that now, it almost means nothing. And so, we love Alabama football. Well, some people do. We love UVA basketball. We love a lot of things, but that's not the kind of love which Jesus is speaking of. You may be familiar with C. S. Lewis's book *Four Loves* where he highlights and gives descriptions of the four types of love spoken of in the Scriptures. And the first one that he talks about is that friendship love we see in the Scriptures. There is also this love of affection. It's similar to friendship love, but it's more of this gut affection. I can have friendship love for an individual, I can have love of affection for UVA basketball. And then there is probably the most common, the romantic love which is most of the time what people think of when they hear the word "love." In our culture, that's what people think about most which means as those who live in this culture even if you're a believer, you need to know that that's part of your default. When people talk about love, you immediately think romantic love. When you read it in the Scriptures, you immediately think romantic love.

And this text is that divine love that Jesus was talking about. He uses that word “agape” in our text this morning. And it has four attributes for it. So, if you’re a note taker, here are my little notes here. This agape love that Jesus is speaking about has these four elements to them. It’s active. In Luke’s gospel, the parallel text to this in Luke 6, he makes this statement in verse 27, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you,” highlighting the fact that this agape love is an active love. It’s active and it also delights to give. This is what I find helpful. This is what I think Jesus is using the illustration in verse 45 about bringing rain to the just and the unjust. What He’s saying is, it is part of my nature to give. I love to give. And you and I are probably like, no, I only give to those who are deserving. He’s like, no, you don’t understand who I am. I love to give just because that’s who I am. And we see that illustrated here in this portion of the text. The generous heart of God to us becomes both our example and our power. And the illustration that Jesus uses here is what we often speak of as common grace. Common grace is one of those pictures for those of us who are Christians reminding us that it is the heart of God to delight to give.

And third is that it’s unconditional, right? This means that it is present regardless of the responsiveness of the object. Let me read this, “It means that it is present regardless of the responsiveness of the object. This love keeps on loving even when the loved one is unkind, unlovable, and unworthy. Our love of enemies is independent of the person loved and independent of their rank or attractiveness.” Friends, if you’re not a Christian here this morning, you need to understand that this is the heart of God for His people. That it is this relentless pursuing love to restore His people and His creation. And you and I don’t get in because somehow there is something in us that He thought worth redeeming. He delights to redeem. He delights to give. And it is an unconditional love of redemption.

The last is a deep commitment to the wellbeing of the loved one. And that’s what we see through the text and throughout the new testament. This divine love is not an emotion but an act of the will. And I would give you this definition, that this divine love “is an unconditional love delighting in and promoting the flourishing of another whom we consider precious regardless of their perceived worth or merit.” We call it divine love because it is the love that God has shown to all that He has redeemed. If you’re in Christ this morning, you have experienced that kind of love. And if you are here this morning beating yourself for the failures of this past week saying, I don’t believe that love is for me – I am telling you that if you are in Christ, that is how He loves you and me.

You may think, okay, you came from out of town. You’re saying a lot. I’m not sure that I am going to trust you. I know you’ve been friends with Randy for a long time. I trust Randy. But I’m not sure I can trust you. Fair enough. Write these texts down, John 13. Spend some time this week going through it. It’s there that Jesus says this, “The new commandment I give you, that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” I love the fact that the book of 1 John is on the front of our order of worship today. The book of 1 John would be an easy one to read this week. And you’d hear things like this, what kind of love the Father’s given to us that we should be called children of God, and so we are.

Or this in 1 John 3: “By this we know love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

Or this in 1 John 4: “Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love. In this, the love of God was made manifest among us that he sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Friends, do you know that love? If you’re in Christ this morning, are you experiencing that love? Is that the reservoir you go to when shame begins to creep in, when your inner voices begin to tell you, I can’t believe you call yourself a Christian. After saying that at work today, really? Really? I can’t believe you took a second and third look at that woman. You’re not a Christian. How can you call yourself a

Christian to have those thoughts of anger? Really, you're a Christian and you just yelled at your kids and you're going to church. It's hypothetical. I'm not saying that happened this morning necessarily.

And what Jesus is saying is, don't you know my love is not built or contingent on how lovable you are? Because if that had been the motivation in my love for you, I would have never bestowed it upon you. And you could've never been good enough. But I love you. And I call you my child. And I see you as my child. And when you blow it, I love you as a father loves his child.

That's the definition. We begin to see the direction is seeping out here for us, right? The direction we see later on as He goes on and describes the object when He talks about loving those who have persecuted us. And then He makes this statement in verse 46, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

Before we are quick to become self-righteous against Jesus's initial hearers, let me just stop. We need to understand – and you can see this in the Old Testament, particularly in Leviticus 19 – the people of God for a millennium already had been taught that they were called to hate the things that God hated and love the things that God loved. And so, it makes sense – because they're just like you and me – that what they heard in the translation was: hate things that you hate and hate the people that do them, and only love the people that love the things that you love. And Jesus is breaking in here and saying, no, you misunderstood this. We are going to hate these behaviors, we are going to hate these things that God finds detestable. But we're still called to love.

Dallas Willard in his commentary on this says this,

"Loving those who love us and lavishing care and honor on those of our own group is something that, well, terrorists do. How then can that serve to distinguish the goodness of someone born into God's family or the presence of a different kind of reality in life? Even those with no knowledge of God at all do that."

What he's saying is everybody loves their own kind, right? Everybody loves people like us. And that's not what Jesus is saying. The point Jesus is making is that this divine love is not sentiment so much as service. It's practical, humble, sacrificial. Our enemy is seeking our harm, we must seek their good. This is how God has treated us. Romans 5:10, "For while we were his enemies, he died for us." That's why Luke in Luke 6:36 says, "Be merciful as I have been merciful to you."

A great parable for this text is Matthew 18, the unmerciful servant, who Jesus uses as illustration of saying, if you forget how much mercy you've received in Christ, you're going to become an ungrateful and harsh people. But when you remember how much mercy you've been given, then we become a people who say, I get to share some of that mercy with you because I've been a recipient of it.

Maybe you guys haven't heard it in this part of the country, but we're actually in another election cycle already. It comes earlier and earlier each year, doesn't it? I'm like, really? 2020, oh my goodness. Anyhow, there's probably nothing in our culture that's more antithetical to what Jesus is saying here than what we see in the public square. The problem is that it seeps into the church, I think. And we begin to look a lot more like the world than we care to admit. And it happens this way, somebody criticizes us and then we then we attack their character. Somebody snubs us, and so we distance ourselves from them. We begin to do the same thing within the community of faith that the world is doing outside the community of faith.

This, to me, is actually one of the hardest things from this text. That Jesus is saying, remember I'm taking your enemies and calling them to become friends, and your hearts bent takes your friends and turns them into enemies. What He's saying is, the church begins to live this inverted kingdom way of life. The world outside will be changed.

And Jesus gives us one of those little nuggets that He drops in this text that I think, oftentimes, we blow past. What He says is we're to pray for our enemies. Now, I'm not sure whether you've done that in your own life, but I can tell you from experience, it's really hard to hate somebody that you pray for. As a pastor, and obviously I've done lots of counseling through the years, one of the things that we would regularly encourage married couples that were struggling was to pray for their spouse, to say positive things to one another. And for many cases, that actually kind of got things right-sided again. Because it's really hard to hate a spouse when you're praying that they would flourish. Incidentally, children, it's hard to hate a sibling if you pray for them. It's hard to hate a parent.

This worldly love, it's actively loving each other within the church, that we don't hide from each other, we don't avoid one another when things get hard, but we move towards each other. We pray for rather than avoid. It's funny even walking into the service this morning, we're talking about this a little bit unscripted. I'm convinced that too often, the practice of love within the church – and this is a statement of my heart, not yours, but if it applies, I pray that it's beneficial – that the church's practice of love is really just a low-grade tolerance of each other. But not the kind of love that Jesus is calling us to here.

The direction of this love is to everyone. And that's hard. That's hard. That's the dilemma of this text because if I'm going to love that way, it's going to cost me a lot. This is why that C. S. Lewis quote resonates with so many of us when he says,

“If we love anything, our heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it in tact, you must give it to no one, you must love no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries, lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness, but know that in that casket that's safe, dark, motionless and airless, your heart will change. It will not be broken. It will, however, become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”

We should all feel that right now in this text. Jesus, what you're calling me to, this direction of love, this is going to be terrifying. If I'm going to love this way, I'm going to suffer pain. It's going to be heartache because people are going to hurt me and I'm going to hurt them.

And that's why Jesus lands us here with this dwelling. He's saying, when you realize that you're dwelling in me, if I am love, that you dwell in me, then it's my love that you love others with. It's my love that helps you to know and experience love apart from the times that you get hurt. And this is where Dallas Willard has been most helpful for me in this passage. In his commentary here, he makes this statement. He says, “We discover love as a life power that has the marvelous many-sided expressions spelled out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.” But we make a mistake with this passage in the same way that we make a mistake in 1 Corinthians.

There, Paul tells us “love is patient, love is kind, love is free of jealousy, love isn't rude, it's not self-seeking, it's not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, it takes no joy in things that are wrong but instead in what is true. It always accepts, always hopes, always endures, and it never quits.” That's 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. People usually read this text as telling them to be patient, to be kind, to be free of jealousy just as they read Jesus's discourse here in Matthew 5 as telling us to go the second mile, to not be angry, to love our enemies. But Jesus and Paul are plainly saying that it is love that does these things, not us. And that what we are to do is to pursue love to pursue Christ. We are to pursue love. And these godly actions and behaviors are the result of dwelling in Him, in His love. Jesus is not calling us to do what He did, but to be as He was, permeated with love. Then the doing of what He did and said becomes the natural expression of who we are in Him.

I think that's why He ends the way He does, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” He uses the Greek word for “the end of things,” “to become mature,” which I think is a better translation of this passage. But even in that, the tense of this is the future indicative tense. So, the passage is “you shall be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” It carries with it both its predictive promise sense – my oldest

is 18, he will graduate in May – and it has this command component to it – you and I will pay our taxes. What Jesus is doing is He's both commanding that we become perfect through loving our enemies and promising that we will be perfect through loving our enemies. The love He shows is the love He commands. He becomes the way and the source of my love for you, for my kids, for my wife, for my enemies.

See, Ken Burns in his documentary did what many things do in my life. They prick my heart. They expose something that's true in it but can never provide healing. And it's only in the gospel that I receive that. Jesus applies the healing balm of the gospel to my heart to both experience and be empowered to love not just my enemies but to learn that the gospel is taking my enemies and making them friends and is keeping my friends from becoming my enemies.

Let's pray together.

Father, we can love this way because you loved us first. And we thank you. I thank you that you're both encouraging and commanding us to love. As Wayne said earlier, it's not good advice. This is a call for us to draw near to Jesus, to be refreshed and renewed in the love of the Father, through the blood of His Son applied by the work of your Spirit in our hearts. That we then can live differently and be different from the world that we live in, that they might see the unconditional, unrelenting, deep love of God for His people and they might come and experience it themselves. We pray it in Jesus's name. Amen.