

Understanding Love
Matthew 5:43-48
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

Matthew 5:43-84 is the last in a series of six specific examples that contrast the traditional teaching by the scribes and Pharisees with the teaching of Jesus. Each of these builds toward the conclusion of what it means to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

The traditional teaching (5:43)

This sixth example by Jesus of the traditional teaching is introduced by the same wording as the second and fifth example, “you have heard that it was said.” What was said was, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” The Old Testament Law taught loving your neighbor: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18).

However, nowhere in the Old Testament is anyone taught the second phrase, to “hate your enemy.” The concept was a conclusion that the Jewish teachers extrapolated from the teaching of loving your neighbor. The text of Leviticus was written to the people of Israel and the neighbor was likely understood to be fellow Jews. The logical conclusion was that enemies, those beyond the Jewish people, were not commanded to be loved and therefore were hated.

This extrapolation that if it is only the neighbor that is to be loved and thus the enemies were to be hated is perhaps supported by misconstruing of other Old Testament verses:

“Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby. Only in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you” (Deuteronomy 20:15-17).

Yet verses that command the destruction of other people were for the purpose of protecting the doctrinal and moral purity of Israel—*“so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the Lord your God”* (Deuteronomy 20:18). Hatred is not required for justice.

Also, verses about God’s perspective of those who do evil, such as Psalm 26:5, *“I hate the assembly of evildoers, And I will not sit with the wicked”* do not instruct man to hate these people. This transfer of God’s role as the righteous judge of His creation to us is unwarranted.

The Law provides instruction on how to also deal mercifully toward one’s enemies. *“If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him”* (Exodus 23:4-5). This verse echoes other Old Testament verses that teaches that Israel should deal kindly with outsiders (Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

While the Jews viewed their neighbor as their fellow Israelites, Jeremiah 7:5-7 expands the term “neighbor” to include aliens beyond the people of Israel, *“For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.”* This limitation of love to one’s neighbor only was clearly a false construct.

Bible-believing Christians can fall into the same trap of extrapolating teaching based on what is not said in the Bible and overlook what is said in the Bible. One example of this is the Charismatic Movement that teaches that people are doing healings and tongues speaking today because it occurred in the New Testament. This is in spite of ample evidence that what occurred in the New Testament is for a specific purpose that does not exist today.

Another example of this is those who teach limited atonement, where passages that teach Christ died for the elect (John 10:11,15; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25) are understood to mean that Christ did not die for the unelect, even though there are verses that clearly teach that Christ died for everyone (John 4:42; Romans 5:6; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Hebrews 2:9; 1 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 2:1).

The teaching of Jesus (5:44)

Jesus unequivocally taught that we are responsible to not only love our neighbor but to also love our enemies. While the traditional teaching taught the Jews to love their neighbor, they limited their understanding of neighbor to fellow Jews. This certainly broadens the Old Testament command to love our neighbor as ourselves to people beyond the nation of Israel.

Indeed, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan shows that Jesus viewed even Samaritans as in the broad classification of "neighbor" when He said, "*Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?*" (Luke 10:36). The Samaritans, despised by the Jews as half-breeds, had no dealings with the Jews according to John 4:9. Yet Jesus' parable described the Samaritan as the neighbor. Love must go beyond those who are like us.

This is an expansion of Jesus' teaching of non-retaliation in Matthew 5:39-41. In those cases persecution was to be responded to by a singular act. Here it is not only the deed that is required, but also the very heart attitude of love that supports the action. We do not only have a responsibility to act rightly when encountering evil people but far more than resisting attacking the person, Jesus here calls us to love our enemy. This is a profound responsibility and does not necessarily end with one interaction.

This love that we are to extend is said to be done specifically by praying for those who persecute us. By saying, "*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*" Jesus clarifies enemies as those who are actively persecuting us. Therefore, this is beyond people who are outsiders but to those who are engaging in evil acts toward us.

By praying for our enemies, we love them. When we pray for people we often find that our heart softens. Praying for our persecutors is a dramatic means of showing love. Jesus was our example of this when He prayed for His persecutors, "*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34). Stephen likewise prayed to the Lord, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them!*" (Acts 7:60). One certain act of love that we must practice is to pray for those who are our enemies.

Jesus' teaching in Luke regarding our love for our enemies includes doing good as an expression of love. "*But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*" (Luke 6:27-28). We are called to do good to those who hate us. Those who curse us must be blessed. Those who mistreat us must be prayed for.

The application of Jesus' teaching (5:45-47)

The pattern of the corrections that Jesus makes to the traditional teaching includes this explanation of why we ought to put "love your enemies" into practice. Matthew 5:45 begins with a purpose statement, "in order that." Jesus gives two basic arguments why it is imperative that we love our enemies, which serve as motivation for our application.

1. The character of God (5:45)

God is love (John 4:8,16) and as followers of God we should love as well. Love is God's communicable attribute that we grow in love. *"May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people"* (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

The motivational statement "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" can lead to a false conclusion of salvation through loving our enemies. This is why the NASB includes a footnoted alternative translation *"show yourselves to be."* When we love our enemies we truly show ourselves to be sons of our Heavenly Father. We do not become sons of our Father by loving, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26).

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12).

By loving and praying for our enemies we demonstrate that we are part of God's family because love is the character of God. *"We love because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19) and God loved us while we were His enemies.

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." (Romans 5:8-10).

The Lord acts lovingly to all even for those who are not sons of God. This is shown by what is known as "common grace." Common grace is that grace of God that all receive. The example Jesus provides is the sun and the rain that blesses the righteous and the unrighteous. Without such blessings of God, no one would even be able to exist. These blessings occur regardless of the choices of man, because God is love.

2. The character of the ungodly (5:46-47)

The second argument why we should love our enemies is from the standard set by evil people themselves. Even those who are evil act in loving ways when it serves them. They love people who love them.

Jesus ascribes this type of reciprocal love to the tax collectors in Matthew 5:46. These tax collectors were local Jews who chose to work for the Roman occupiers who were seizing their money. Matthew was such a tax collector (Matthew 9:9) and was willing to place himself in this derogatory classification.

The Jews despised the Roman occupiers but they even more despised their fellow Jews who profited from the extortion of money from them. Their participation in the corrupt tax system was considered traitorous by their countrymen. Also, their association with the Romans led to them being viewed as unclean, as seen by the view of the Pharisees about Jesus eating with Matthew.

“Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?”” (Matthew 9:10-11).

To love those who love us puts us only on par with those whom the Jews considered to be the worst of their people. For such love Jesus indicates there is no reward. This is because reciprocated love is the reward. Reward is a theme in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:12; 6:1-4, 5-6, 16, 18).

Just as reciprocal love is unrewarded, so are reciprocal greetings. Greetings were customary within Israel (Matthew 10:12) and the culture of greetings among the Gentiles is seen by Paul in his letters (e.g. Romans 16) and seen often in the general epistles as well. Greetings were physical (Romans 16:16) and expressed honor and respect (Matthew 23:7). To fail to greet brethren was a social blunder.

Since a greeting was a basic practice, we can see the divide between Jews and Gentiles. It is a natural thing for all people to only relate to those who are like them. We enjoy greetings from our brethren and they enjoy greetings from us. Jesus makes it clear that to only greet our brothers is not a praiseworthy practice. This was considered a minimum requirement.

Christians are to love one another and are to greet our brothers, but certainly not exclusively. We must do good to all people, certainly our fellow believers but beyond the fellowship also.

“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Galatians 6:10).

Christians, like the people of the world, can give themselves a lot of credit for loving and greeting people. But the failure to love and greet outsiders is the sin of omission. We have a responsibility to those who are beyond our natural relationships. This is the means by which we are able to do good to all people since it is impossible for us to do good to people who we are uninterested in even greeting them.

However, not everyone was considered worthy of a greeting, since it was an expression of honor and respect. We can see this in regard to false teachers.

“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds” (2 John 9-11).

Aside from the false teachers who corrupt the truth of God, we should extend our love to those who do not love us first, especially our enemies. Those who are not like us, who do not share our values and customs and who may make us uncomfortable are to be honored. *“Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17).*

Conclusion (Matthew 5:48)

Jesus' command to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect is not only the conclusion of His sixth example which corrected the traditional teaching of the Jews, it also is the conclusion of all six of these examples. This is the final statement of our ultimate goal for holy living.

This teaching of Jesus is consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament. 1 Peter quotes the Old Testament when Peter wrote, *“like the Holy One who called you, be holy*

yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

It is remarkable how often these words are repeated in Leviticus.

"Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44).

"For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45).

"Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy'" (Leviticus 19:2).

"You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 20:7).

"Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine" (Leviticus 20:26).

The Holy One called us so we should be perfect. This lifts the standard of righteousness far beyond what human religion could possibly expect from any of its followers. As we look at each of these six examples that Jesus gave prior to His command to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, we can see the great reluctance of people in the church to agree with Jesus.

- Rather than say that anger is sinful (Matthew 5:22), we validate our anger as "righteous indignation."
- Rather than dealing with lust in the heart of the man (Matthew 5:28) we use external tactics which blame women.
- Rather than considering divorce as resulting in adultery (Matthew 5:32), we consider the second marriage as legitimate as the first.
- Rather than stick to our word (Matthew 5:37), we will lead people to believe what they want to hear so that we can escape our commitment.
- Rather than yielding to evil people (Matthew 5:39), we affirm our rights and retaliate.

- Rather than loving our enemies (Matthew 5:44), we hold grudges and stay with those we are most comfortable with.

Each of these are examples of how we can practice our Christian faith under the same thinking as anyone following a false religion to adhere to a moral code. We want to be considered righteous but our righteousness is just as external as the scribes and Pharisees. We practice this external righteousness to be noticed by men and have our reward in full (Matthew 6:1).

The standard that Christ emphasizes results in humble brokenness as those in need of forgiveness. We know we are not holy as God is holy and the only way to the Father is through forgiveness based upon the Son's atoning sacrifice. Once we understand our need and embrace God's forgiveness through faith, we will be empowered to love by the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus said about the woman who anointed His feet with perfume in Luke 7, *"For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little"* (Luke 7:47). When we have been forgiven greatly we will love greatly. When we have been forgiven little, we love little.

The recognition of the greatness of the Lord's forgiveness in Christ is the essence of our motivation to love our neighbors and our enemies. And *"love is the fulfillment of the Law"* (Romans 13:10).