

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

Introduction

In the Sermon On The Mount Jesus has been speaking about God's standards of righteousness in His Kingdom. Jesus has touched on the Laws of life (vv.21-32); the Law of lips (vv.33-37); and now the Law of Love (vv. 38-48). The Laws of life addressed the issues of family life and the Law of lips our speech and now Jesus invites his listeners to consider dealing with people who refuse to be just towards us. We are to demonstrate love rather than vindictiveness (vv.38-42). We show love rather than hatred (vv.43-48) Jesus has spoken about hatred in the heart as murder (vv.21-26); Jesus has spoken about lust in the heart as adultery (vv.27-30); Jesus has spoken about divorce (vv.31-32); oaths (vv.33-37); retaliation (vv.38-42) and now love (vv.43-48).

Making The Choice To Love Or Hate (v.43)

Matthew 5:43-48 (NKJV)⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18; "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD".

Once again Jesus deals with the problem of misinterpretation and misapplication of the Scriptures. When the Jewish people read "nor bear any grudge against the children of your people" it opened the door to bearing grudges against anyone else! In Exodus 23:4-5 we read; "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. (5) "If you see the donkey of some one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it."

The Law did **not** command or demand hatred for enemies. God's standard has always been concern, compassion and love for our neighbors.

What then do we do with some of the Psalms of David where he writes (139:19) "Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. (20) For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain. (21) Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? (22) I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies."

Did David cultivate a kind of righteous hostility towards the enemies of God? I think the answer is yes! There was kind of righteous indignation and godly hostility towards those who oppressed and persecuted the people of God.

But for some—righteous indignation and godly hostility towards those who oppressed and persecuted the people of God turned into an ungodly loathing—revulsion and repulsion against anyone who wasn't a Jew.

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

Some Jewish groups (Essenes) “emphasized hatred toward those outside the covenant” (see IVP Bible Background Commentary; Craig Keener; p.60).

The Law (Lev.19:18) said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—it would appear the religious authorities diminished or neglected the “as yourself”. This was a problem. People who are proud and self-righteous cannot conceive of loving anyone as much as they love themselves. The Bible teaches human beings are inclined towards self-love and self-interest.

The Scribes and the Pharisees were well aware of the full text. Jesus would later give a Parable of the Good Samaritan that our neighbor is anyone who comes within our sphere of influence. The Book of Job—perhaps the oldest book in the Bible—before the giving of the Law; has Job declaring (Job 31:29-30); “If I have rejoiced at the destruction of him who hated me, or lifted myself up when evil found him (indeed I have not allowed my mouth to sin by asking for a curse on his soul)”.

Like so many people—they knew the Bible—and were aware of God’s standard. The Scripture was fully known but only partially taught.

The Lord Jesus to bless, to pray, and love our enemies.

And there’s the shock for so many. When did you first realize someone hated you? You might think; “No one hates me. I am loved by everyone!

Someone said, “Enemies are not those who hate us, but rather those whom we hate.” There might be a measure of truth to that statement; but the sad truth is sometimes people will hate you.

Making The Choice To Love Rather Than Hate (vv.44-47)

⁴⁴But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

Here in four commands; Jesus gives us insight into just how we can love—those we’d rather hate. Here we are given a glimpse into the statement love your enemies. We (1) love our enemies; (2) bless those who curse us; (3) we do good to those who hate us (4) we pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us.

The love Jesus speaks of is not simply an feeling of affection but rather a moral imperative.

1. “Love your enemies”. What kind of love is so great that it even embraces those who are committed to hating? Why God’s love of course! The Bible says that even while we were enemies Christ died for the ungodly. The religious leaders of Jesus day were no different from people in important positions of government, church and business today! They “were

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

proud, prejudiced, judgmental, spiteful, hateful, vengeful men who masqueraded as the custodians of God's law and the spiritual leaders of Israel. To them, Jesus' command to love your enemies must have seem naive and foolish in the extreme" (John MacArthur p. 344). Does this sound like anyone you know? We are faced with a choice—to love our enemies or act out of fear or prejudice or ignorance or adopt some other agenda of hate or self-promotion!

Human beings tend to love things or people based on how desirable that thing or person might be. We love people who are attractive. We love enjoyable hobbies. There is a kind of love that is self-serving and self-satisfying. **But God's love is different. His love is need-oriented—that is based on seeing and meeting the needs of others.** In the New Testament three words translate—love—phileo—affection—eros—sexual love—and agape—the kind of love that seeks to meet the needs of others—the kind of love that asks the question—what is best for him or her? Agape is acting—not from self-interest but in the interest of others.

In the days of the American Revolution there lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania—a Baptist pastor by the name of Peter Miller who enjoyed the friendship of General George Washington. There also lived in that town one Michael Wittman—an evil minded man who did everything in his power to abuse and oppose the Pastor. One day Michael Wittman was involved intrusion and was arrested and sentenced to death. The old preacher started out on foot and walked 70 miles to Philadelphia to plead for the man's life. He was admitted into Washington's presence and at once begged for the life of the traitor. Washington said, "No Peter, I cannot grant you the life of your friend." The preacher exclaimed, "My friend, he is the bitterest enemy I have." Washington cried, "What? You've walked 70 miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light. I will grant the pardon." And he did. And Peter Miller took Michael Wittman from the very shadow of death back into his own home in Ephrata —no longer as an enemy but as a friend (adopted from *The Grace of Giving*; by Stephen Olford).

John Henry Newman wrote; "We should conduct ourselves toward our enemy as if he were one day to be our friend".

2. Bless those who curse you. Have something nice to say about them even when they have little or nothing nice to say about you.

3. Do good to those who hate you.

4. **Jesus insists we pray for those who persecute us.** Some of us are more than happy to pray for our enemies. We pray "Lord smite them, break their teeth, ruin their lives." Some of us have a hard time praying for people we love or care about. If you pray for your family, loved ones, friends, leaders, how much time is left for those who hate and persecute you? When we pray for our enemies an amazing thing occurs—they may not change right away but we change. I imagine most people live with some kind of unpleasant memory or fear or sin or guilt. There may be someone in your life who you think is so hardened, hardened beyond hope, selfish beyond description, so sinful that he or she makes even Satan blush. You may think they never

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

feel guilt, they never experience the weight and punishment of sin, but they do! In the history of the church the most egregious persecutions have come from so called religious people. We don't think of atheists or agnostics or philosophical naturalists—as religious—but make no mistake they are religious zealots. False religion and false religious people cannot stand the purity and simplicity of the gospel. They hate a gospel of simple faith and trust in Jesus, of turning from sin and turning to God, a gospel not based on works but pure unadulterated grace, a gospel that rejects works based salvation, but a gospel soaked and saturated in grace and love. Those who oppose God's Word will oppose God's people. Think about it. Isn't persecution at least in part the world's way of opposing the truth of God's Word? The Spirit of God and the Word of God and the people of God expose people at their point of self-justification. Christians do not suggest that Jesus is a way—perhaps the best way of many ways—but the only way! Jesus promised persecution (John 15:20). “Jesus taught that every disciple who makes his faith known is going to pay some price for it, and that we are to pray for those who exact the price from us. Spurgeon said, ‘prayer is the forerunner of mercy’ and that is perhaps the reason why Jesus mentions prayer here” (MacArthur p. 347).

The ancient church father Chrysostom said that prayer is the height of self-control and that we have most brought our lives into conformity to God's standards when we pray for our persecutors. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor imprisoned during WWII in his failed attempt to assassinate Hitler wrote; “This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God” (quoted in MacArthur p. 347).

⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father 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.

In what way are we “sons of our Father in heaven”? When we have His heart. When we reflect His character. When we demonstrate His love.

Jesus is not suggesting this is the way to become sons of the Father—but rather this is the way sons of the Father show they are sons of the Father. **Children act like their parents.** I know what some of you must thinking; “God I hope that's not true.”

Have you ever met a child and right away you knew who his parents must be? To love our enemies and pray for them reveals our relationship with God. Loving as God loves, does not make us his children, it is evidence that we are His children. The tragedy of Ghandi's encounter with Christians is often the tragedy of people who encounter you or me! People judge Christ, Christianity and the Bible by what you say and do. Are we living up to the reality of what Jesus commands? Jesus commanded us to live and love and act a certain way. When we fail to do that we send a false message about our heavenly Father.

The world is broken, twisted, distorted, fallen. But people in the world have come to expect that Christians claim to be different. Different cultures all over the world who have never heard the

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

gospel are shocked by a relationship with Christ that really results in loving our enemies. When someone loves that way, it is strong evidence of a life-giving relationship with the Lord of the Universe.

But think of the context. The Lord God is no respecter of persons. The Lord God is gracious—allowing the sun to shine on the evil as well as the good—and rain on the just and the unjust. This is common grace. We should extend common grace to all—we deal graciously and fairly with all.

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Were there some Jews who were kind to Gentiles?

⁴⁷And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?

Has anyone ever said to you; “Why do you think you are better than me?” The question prompts a number of possible responses.

Christians are called to a higher standard. Christians are called to better behavior by virtue of love! The religious leaders—the Scribes the Pharisees genuinely believed they were better by every measure—whereby humans measure moral virtue. But the measures were for the most part external; pray—read the Scriptures—offer the sacrifices—do good—hate evil. The Scribes and the Pharisees were convinced that in matters of the Law and zeal for Judaism no one was better. If you asked them, “do you love me”? If you were a tax collector, a prostitute, or a gentile the answer is no! Jesus cuts through their blind hypocrisy and points out there is nothing special or godly about their love. You must understand something: “Those were probably the most devastating and insulting words these religious leaders had ever heard, and they must have been enraged. Tax-gatherers were traitorous extortioners, and almost by definition were dishonest, heartless and irreligious. In the eyes of most Jews, Gentiles were outside the pale of God’s concern and mercy, fit only as destruction as His enemies and the enemies of those thought they were his people” (MacArthur p. 349).

Love: God’s Standard For Perfection (v.48)

⁴⁸Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

We must add another commandment. In verse 44; (1) love your enemies; (2) bless those who curse you; (3) do good to those who hate you; (4) pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you and now (5) be perfect.

The word 'perfect' can mean whole or complete or mature and carries the nuance of merciful (see Craig Keener p. 61; IVP Bible Background Commentary). We know the Father is sinless and flawless. Does Jesus expect sinlessness and flawlessness from the Citizen?

The command for perfection is a command for moral perfection; a pure heart, pure speech, pure relationships, pure deeds. Yet we fail. We are not perfect. We must throw ourselves on the mercy of God and the grace of God and the forgiveness of God. And we find forgiveness in Christ, acceptance in Christ, adoption in Christ.

Once again—the context drives the meaning. Jesus has asked the Citizen to love those who hate us; to pray for those who persecute us; to show kindness to friend and foe; here perfection almost certainly means spiritual maturity; personal integrity; the kind of maturity and integrity that allows the Christian to imitate God in blessing to everybody absent partiality (adapted from William MacDonald in the Believer's Bible Commentary p. 1223).

Does Jesus demand the impossible? Later in Matthew 19:26 Jesus says, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

There is no perfection apart from Christ—apart from His mercy, His grace, His sacrifice, His love. In Christ the impossible becomes possible.

Conclusion

Remember Jesus has been exposing the false views of righteousness for something far greater—a right view of righteousness that reflects the mind, the heart, and the character of God. We are salt and light. Jesus has condemned adultery (vv.27-30) but also elevated purity of mind. Jesus has censured divorce (vv.31-32) and elevated integrity of marriage. Jesus has condemned oaths and elevated honesty in speech (vv.33-37). Jesus has encouraged citizens in His Kingdom to go the second mile—(vv.38-42) and to love our enemies. Yes the Jews were taught even commanded to love their neighbor—and cultivate hostility towards the enemies of God.

In 1567 King Phillip of Spain appointed the Duke of Alba as Governor of the lower part of the nation. The Duke was a bitter enemy of the newly emerging Protestant Reformation. His rule was called the Reign of Terror, and his Council was called the Bloody Council, because it ordered the slaughter of so many Protestants. It is reported that one man who was sentenced to die for his biblical faith managed to escape during the dead of winter. As he was being pursued by a lone soldier, the man came to a lake whose ice was thin and cracking. Somehow he managed to get safely across the ice, but as soon as he reached the other side he heard his pursuer screaming. The soldier had fallen through the ice and was about to drown. At the risk of being

Loving Those We'd Rather Hate

Matthew 5:43-48

captured, tortured and eventually killed—or being drowned himself—the man went back across the lake and rescued his enemy, because the love of Jesus Christ constrained or motivated him to do so. He had no choice but to be faithful to Christ's command.

We have no choice but to be faithful to Christ's command. Love, bless, do good, pray. Mature—in your moral and spiritual perfections—love your enemy. Your enemy is anyone who opposes you for any reason. Love means acting towards them with God's intentions. Bless them. Find reasons (excuses) to say good things rather than bad things. Pray for them. You will desire to know whether or not God is answering your prayers. Loving your enemy will at times transform your enemy—but it will always transform you.