

Loving Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

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Well, good morning. For those of you who don't know, my name is Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it is my privilege to get to open up God's Word for us this morning as we continue in our study of the Sermon on the Mount. And over the last several weeks, we've been hearing Jesus explain to his followers what it actually means to live as Kingdom people. And time and time again, he's shown himself to be the perfect authoritative interpreter of God's law over and against the scribes and the Pharisees. And of course, this rankled them. After all, they saw themselves as the authoritative, faithful interpreters of God's law. In fact, in their eyes, Jesus's interpretations of the law left him open to the accusation that he was deviating from it, or perhaps even dispensing with it altogether. But of course, this was nonsense. Jesus was a faithful Jew and lover of God's law. He hadn't come to abolish the law or the prophets.

In Matthew 5:17, he says plainly that he'd come to fulfill them. And so the interpretations we've already heard him give of the laws about murder and divorce and the others, they ought to be seen as illustrations of what it means for his followers to fulfill the law as they walk in step with him. Well, this morning, we've come to the sixth and last of the so-called antitheses, these antithetic statements of Jesus. And it focuses on the commandment to love your neighbor. So how does Jesus interpret this commandment? And what does his interpretation teach us as his followers? Well, I invite you to open your copy if you haven't already to Matthew chapter 5, and we'll read verses 43 through 48.

“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)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Almighty God, what a privilege it is to come together as your people and to listen to your Word. We ask, Lord, that you will help us to submit to your Word, to hear it afresh. And to that end, we ask that by your Spirit you will open our eyes and ears to it, that you will soften our hearts. May the things that you want us to hear and to learn go deep, deep within us, and change us, and transform us more and more into the image of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Let me begin this morning by telling you about Ruby Bridges. Ruby Bridges, as many of you know, was an African-American girl living with her family in New Orleans over 60 years ago. And in 1960, at the age of six, she passed a test qualifying her to attend the all-white school William France Elementary. And so with her parents' encouragement and support, she attended. And this decision was met with outright fear and hatred. The community publicly

ostracized her. Everyone, students and teachers alike, refused to stay at the school with a black child in attendance. Everyone except one teacher, Barbara Henry, who stayed and taught Ruby alone in the classroom for the entire year. What's more, in order for Ruby actually to get to school, she had to be escorted by federal marshals through a crowd of angry white protesters who hurled things at her, yelled racial slurs, threatened her with poison. And one woman even placed before her a coffin with a black doll inside as she quietly walked. Every day that year, little six-year-old Ruby, she walked through a vitriolic throng of men, women and children who had set themselves up as her enemy. Not because of anything she had done, but simply because of the color of her skin. And the horror and the shame of this scene was captured in Norman Rockwell's famous 1964 painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, which used to hang in the Oval Office.

So how did little Ruby respond to her enemies? What did she do? Let me ask you the same question. What do you do, or even what do you just think about doing when you suffer mistreatment or offense at the hand of your enemies? I mean, we've all got them, enemies. Probably not like those Ruby faced, but they're still there. So think about it for a moment. When a classmate badmouths you behind your back to others, when your opponent commits a deliberate foul against you that injures and sidelines you, when someone cuts you off on the road, when someone in a position of authority abuses their power and uses it to threaten your reputation and perhaps even your livelihood, when a friend decides that your years-long relationship is over and freezes you out because of some simple miscommunication or maybe because of a deep ideological difference or whatever other mistreatment or offense it might be, friends, how do you respond? Has that person now become your enemy? And if so, what then? What do you want to do to them in return?

Well, if you're anything like me, I can imagine that your first instinct is probably to treat them as they've treated you, isn't it? I knew a girl once who'd been slighted in some silly way by her sisters, and so she retaliated by doing something equally silly to them, I'm sure you can imagine. And as she was being reprimanded by her parents, she said, you know, the problem with this family is that no one follows the golden rule. If you treated me like I wanted to be treated, then I'd treat you the same way. She didn't quite get the golden rule right, and yet I think her response is a perfect illustration of what our own fallen instincts encourage us to do when we suffer at the hands of our enemies. You see, when we're hurt or offended, our instinct is to give back, just like we got, isn't it? But friends, this isn't what Jesus demands of us. It's not the way of kingdom people, and if this sounds familiar, that's because this is just what we heard last week as Penny walked us through the previous passage about not retaliating when we're wronged.

And in our passage this morning, we're going to hear something very similar, only this time we're going to hear Jesus come at it from another angle. We're going to hear him call out the prevailing misguided interpretation of the Old Testament command to love your neighbor, which was likely being pushed by the scribes and Pharisees. And then just like with the previous five antitheses, we're going to hear Jesus give his own perfect authoritative interpretation of this command that is both biblically faithful and radically counter-cultural. And so what I'd like to do this morning is first help us to understand just what makes Jesus's interpretation of this particular command so different from that of the Jewish leadership of his day, and then I'd like to help us understand the reasoning behind this radical command that he gives us.

And so go ahead, look at verses 43 and 44. Listen to what Jesus says there. He says, “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.” Now it wouldn't surprise me if some of you are scratching your heads at verse 43 and asking, now wait, wait a minute. Does the Bible really say that? Are we actually told to hate our enemies? Well, no. The scripture in question is part of Leviticus 19:18, which simply says, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It doesn't say anything about hating your enemy. Why then, if it's not in the text, had the Israelites been hearing this bit about hating their enemies, as Jesus said they had? Let me suggest a couple of things.

First, I think it was probably an inference drawn, however misguided, from Israel's story. After all, the Old Testament scriptures are full of example after example of God's hatred of evil and his punishment of the wicked. Just think for a moment about the destruction of Canaan or the destruction of Egypt. And wasn't it David, King David himself, who said in Psalm 139:21, “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?” In other words, given the Old Testament story, I don't think it's hard to imagine that the Jewish leadership thought that they were merely following the examples of heroes like David, and even the example of the Lord himself, in hating their enemies.

Secondly, I think this teaching about hating your enemy was the natural result of the Jewish leadership drawing their circle tight and defining who one's neighbor is in a very restrictive manner. And on the surface, this makes some sense. After all, Leviticus 19 wasn't given as a law to the world. It was given to the Israelite community, who alone were God's chosen covenant people. And since it was given only to them, it's not hard for me to imagine that the Jewish leadership had come to the conclusion that this command to love your neighbor only applied to those within the community, and that it was fair game, on the other hand, if not a sign of righteousness, to hate those outside of the community as enemies. And in fact, this is precisely what the super righteous separatist Jewish faction, the Essenes, think Dead Sea Scrolls, this is what they appear to have been doing at the time of Jesus, where they taught their followers in their community rule to love all the sons of light, and to hate all the sons of darkness. And yet, despite all the seeming wisdom of this interpretation, Jesus said they'd gotten it wrong.

And that's because he knew that in their self-righteousness, and in their nationalistic pride, they'd passed over the command that actually follows in the very same chapter of the command in verse 34, that told them to treat the stranger who sojourns with them as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself. He knew that they neglected the practical real world application of this command by Moses, who said to the Israelites in Exodus 23:4-5, “if you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall rescue it with him.” And Jesus knew that in their hatred of their enemies, they'd forgotten the profound wisdom of Solomon, who taught in Proverbs 25:21, “if your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he's thirsty, give him water to drink.”

You see, Jesus knew that this type of indiscriminate love was at the very heartbeat of God. It's what was on display when God called Abram out of the idolatrous land of and promised to bless not only him, but to make him a blessing to the nations. And even further back in the story, it's what was on full display when God moved toward Adam and Eve, despite their rebellion and sin, and promised to give them life, not death, through the seed, the champion

seed that he would one day send. And so it really should come as no surprise to us that for Jesus, one's neighbor included even one's enemy. In fact, although we don't have time to turn to it this morning, this is the whole point of Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. And friends, this is why we hear him say in verse 44 that kingdom people aren't called to hate their enemies. Oh, they're called to love them. And yet this was a radically counter-cultural command, given the prevailing Jewish wisdom of the day, that that taught that every Gentile, every traitorous tax collector, and every soldier of Rome that they saw every day was an enemy to be hated. As Jesus continues in verses 45 - 48, we hear him give explicit reasons for his command to love your enemy, reasons which in turn highlight who we are as his followers on the one hand, and the character of God on the other.

And so first, I want you to notice what he says in verse 45. He says that you are to love your enemies so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. Now at first glance, it might sound like he's saying there's a sort of quid pro quo going on here. If you do this, if you love your enemies, then you'll earn the right to be children of God. But friends, that's not what he's saying. After all, think about what John says in his gospel. In John 1:12, he says, "but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." And on top of this, let's not miss the fact that even here in our passage, as Jesus gives this reason, he says that God is your Father who is in heaven. In other words, sonship, our sonship for those who have turned to the Lord and repentance and faith is assumed in Jesus's reasoning. And so here he's not calling us to love our enemies so that we'll earn sonship.

No, he's calling us to be who we already are as sons and daughters by imaging who our heavenly Father is in our dealings with others, even our enemies. But of course, this raises the question, is this what our heavenly Father is like? Does he actually love his enemies? And the answer to this question is a resounding yes. In fact, Jesus goes on in verse 45 to illustrate this very thing, saying that our heavenly Father, what does he do? He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. You see, the character of God was and is and always will be unlike the character of the world around us. His basic kindness to his creatures is indiscriminate. He doesn't bless Christ the King's little plot of land here with the warmth of his sun or the refreshment of his rain to the exclusion of our unbelieving neighbors. No, he blesses all of us. And yet such indiscriminate love bestowed on even an enemy was largely unheard of in Jesus's day.

Unlike our heavenly Father, folks then reserved their love only for those who loved them back, like the tax collectors he mentions in verse 46. And they even refused to publicly honor with a greeting all but those they considered to be one of their own, their brothers, like the Gentiles in verse 47. You see, discriminating, calculating love, not indiscriminate love, was the wisdom of the day. After all, why, why waste your time and resources on someone who can't reciprocate? And why risk your untarnished reputation by befriending someone of low character? But you know, it's not all that different today, is it? I mean, aren't we all encouraged to reserve our public kindness and support for members of our own tribe, whatever that tribe is? Isn't the dominant message we hear that we should give ourselves in love only to those we think are somehow deserving of our love? And on the flip side of that, don't we all live with almost interminable encouragement from the world around us to insult and to cancel and to vilify those we consider our enemies, whether that's only because we have a different political view or because we don't like what they post on social media, or even because we've suffered a slight in person.

But friends, this type of love is nothing more than what Charles Quarles calls it. It's "mercenary love." It's mercenary love, and it's nothing like the love of our Heavenly Father, who moved toward us in kindness, knowing full well the depths of our unworthiness and our inability to reciprocate, to pay Him back. And despite the fact that we are sinners, even His enemies, as Paul tells us in Romans 5. And friends, it's this type of love, indiscriminate love, which is the hallmark of our Heavenly Father, whose love itself, it's this type of love that Jesus is calling us to as kingdom people. And really, I think this is the point of verse 48, when He says, "you therefore must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." You see, I think it's easy for us to misunderstand this statement as a as a final call to moral perfection, but that's not His point.

After all, Jesus recognized that there will be times when we as kingdom people will sin and need to ask for and extend forgiveness. In fact, this is what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, which we'll get to in the following chapter. Instead, Jesus is simply calling us here to embrace our status as sons and daughters, and to seek to emulate the perfect character of our Heavenly Father in our love for others, in full awareness that we are works in progress, and that we are, as the Apostle Paul says, and in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we are being transformed into the same image, that's Jesus's image, from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. So what does this type of indiscriminate love look like for you and for me? After all, we're not God. We don't control the sun or the rain. How do we embody it? Well, I think Jesus, I think what He has already taught us in the Beatitudes, gives us at least part of a blueprint for how we can love our enemies.

Just think back on the Beatitudes for a moment. There Jesus taught us what? He taught us to be peacemakers. And He taught us to extend mercy. Friends, can you envision what it would be like if we embraced even just these two teachings of our Lord, and lived them out when we were wronged? I think it would be transformative. Many of you know that several years ago, our brother Steve Hanko, by the way, I asked him if I could share this. You might remember that that Steve was hit while on his bike from behind by a careless woman driving at high speed. He was flipped over the car, and he suffered incredible damage to his spine. And while he was laid out on the street, and the woman approached, you know what he did? He didn't lash out. Instead, he shared the gospel with her from the book of Romans. This woman, who for all intent and purposes, was at that moment his enemy, he loved with the merciful love of Christ. And he'd be the first to admit that this response was entirely due to the grace of God in his life. But friends, that's the point. The indiscriminate love of God shown to Steve, and shown to you, and to me, it's transformative. And the Lord wants us to embody it.

Perhaps the most significant way we can embody this type of indiscriminate love comes from this morning's passage itself. Look again at verse 44. There Jesus says, "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." Friends, he tells us to pray for them. And I suspect that if you're anything like me, this is probably the last thing you want to do, isn't it? Why do you think that is? Why don't we want to pray for our enemies? I think it's because in praying for them, we know that we would be asking the Lord to be merciful to them. We'd be asking the Lord to bless them. And we'd be humbling ourselves before his sovereign purposes, and asking for his will to be done, and not our own. And when someone's hurt us, we don't want to do that. We want to lash out. We want to protect ourselves. We want justice, not mercy, to be served. But friends, think about our Lord's response on the cross as the soldiers divided his garments. What did he do? He prayed for them, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And remember what Stephen did when he was being stoned to death? He prayed for his attackers, saying, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Or consider the story of Little Ruby Bridges that I mentioned earlier. How did she respond to her enemies? Well, during the year she attended William France Elementary, a child psychologist, Robert Coles, he met with her weekly to see how she was doing. And there's a profound story he tells that I'd like to close with. You see, after being told by her teacher that she'd noticed Ruby's lips moving as she made her daily walk through the angry crowd to school, Coles asked Ruby, "who are you talking to, Ruby?" "I was talking to God and praying for the people in the street," she said. "Why were you doing that, Ruby?" "Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don't you think they need praying for?" Coles responded affirmatively, but pushed further. "Where did you learn that?" "From my mommy and daddy and from the church. I pray every morning and every afternoon when I go home," Coles continued. "But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them." "No", she said. "I just keep praying for them and hope God will do good to them. I always pray the same thing. Please, dear God, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

Friends, can you imagine praying like that in the midst of such suffering? And yet that's exactly what the Lord's calling you and me to do. You see, to be able to pray for our enemies in such a way is a hallmark of kingdom people, and it's an embodiment of our Father's love, precisely because through it we imitate our Savior, we imitate our Heavenly Father, and through it we follow in the footsteps of the faithful who have gone before us. And as we pray for our enemies, we confess that we too were once enemies, saved only through the precious grace and blood of Jesus Christ. Friends, may we become kingdom people who embody the indiscriminate love of our Heavenly Father. Let's pray.

Oh, Father, thank you, Lord, for your Word. We thank you that you moved toward sinners, that you loved us, that you reconciled us while we were yet your enemies. Oh Father, make us to be Kingdom people, who move toward others, who extend mercy, who seek peace, and who pray for those who wrong us. We ask all this in the precious name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.