

Title: Love Your Enemies  
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Texts: Matthew 5:20, 43-48  
Curtis Froisland

## Love Your Enemies

**[Proposition: We are called to imitate God who loves even his enemies.]**

There was once a father getting ready to go away on a business trip. Wanting to give his wife some help with the chores, taking out the trash, and so on, he called his oldest son to him and said “Son, you’re the man of the house for the next few days. While I’m away I want you to think about what I would normally do around the house and do it for me.”

When he got back, he asked his wife what the boy had done. She replied: “It was very strange. Right after breakfast, he made himself another cup of coffee, went to the living room and turned on ESPN SportsCenter.” The man wondered if his son had imitated him a bit too accurately.<sup>1</sup>

In our passage today, we have probably Jesus’s most difficult ethical teaching: Love your enemies.” And yet, Jesus says, this is what it means to imitate God. It may be difficult for us, but it is, in my estimation, the essence of the Sermon on the Mount, the most necessary part of the greater righteousness he calls us to. And moreover, critical to understanding Jesus’s ministry as the incarnate Son of God who loves his enemies.

We are called to imitate the God who loves his enemies.

### **I. You and I are called to the deeper righteousness of loving our enemies.**

#### ***A. Common Sense Righteousness***

Our passage begins similarly to each of the previous five examples of deeper/heart righteousness. Jesus begins by quoting the Law, then interprets its deeper meaning. So, in verse 43-44 Jesus says:

*“You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44  
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

The first half of that “You shall love your neighbor” is a quotation from the Law, in this case Leviticus 19:18. But the second half of the sentence “you shall hate your enemy” is not found in the Old Testament. We might call this the “Common Sense Righteousness.” Commentators to this day debate whether or not this is a legitimate interpretation from other OT passages.<sup>2</sup> The idea is certainly found in the Jewish and Greek writings from this same period and probably sounds to us like a fairly common sense approach to life.

#### ***B. The Deeper Righteousness is loving our enemies***

Whatever the case, Jesus understands it to be something familiar to his hearers, and something with which they agreed.<sup>3</sup> And he challenges his ancient hearers—and us—to pursue

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, (London: SPCK, 2004), 50.

<sup>2</sup> For instance: Deut 23:3-6, 25:17-19; Psalm 97:10, 119:113, 139: 21– 22; Eccles. 3: 8; etc.

<sup>3</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew in The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group), 114.

and embody the deeper righteousness: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

He does actually mean it. There is no wiggle room. The word love means: to seek and be committed to the good of our enemies. This is what God’s love is like, he sends his rain and sun even on his enemies, and he sent Jesus to die because he “so loved” the world. It is not about fake emotional fondness or agreement with them, but that we desire from our hearts and with our actions their good—their flourishing.

See, one problem with “common sense righteousness” is that it is thoroughly self-centered. It makes me, and people like me, the benchmark for who is lovable and who is hateable. But we know we aren’t the only ones made in God’s image, with valid experiences and ideas, who are trying to do the best they can, where they are, with what they’ve got. This is why Jesus’s command to love our enemies leads us into deeper righteousness—it requires that I remove myself from the center of every issue and think instead of the good of another who is very different from me.

Illustration:

Thomas Merton once wrote:

Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God.<sup>4</sup>

We can even say that “love of enemies” is the purest form of love. When I love a friend, my spouse, or child, my love is often (though not always) an expression of shared love which I am likely to receive in return. But when I seek to love my enemy I am risking, and choosing to love with no guarantee of appreciation, thanks, or love in return. It becomes a pure gift to my enemy, and a sacrifice of praise to God.

***C. By loving our enemies we enter into the flourishing (good life, kingdom life) Jesus describes in the SOM.***

This is what Jesus is saying in v. 45:

***44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.***

Jesus says the purpose of loving your enemies is that you’ll be “sons of the Father.” There will be a family resemblance between you and the Father who loves his enemies. It’s about imitation, but also participation in the flourishing of Jesus’s kingdom. Notice how this verse calls back to the Beatitudes—Jesus’s vision for “flourishing” for the “good life of the Kingdom”—5:9:

***9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.***

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton in *Seeds of Contemplation*. Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 1.

In other words, the type of person who enters in and experiences the flourishing of the Kingdom of God is the one who love their enemies.

Another way to say it is, when we love our enemies, we experience more fully what it means to say that God loved us by sending Jesus to die for us when we were enemies. If we go on hating our enemies we are missing out on experiencing and participating in the transformative power of God's love.

Illustration:

Economist and author Arthur C. Brooks tells the story of an email he received when his book *Who Really Cares* was released. It began: "Dear Professor Brooks: You are a fraud" and proceeded over the course of about 5000 words (that's about twice as long as this sermon) to criticize in "vitriolic detail" every chapter in the book and attacking Brooks as a researcher and person. You ever receive a mean spirited or harshly critical email or feedback on something you worked hard on?

At first, Brooks felt his options were basically three: ignore, insult, or destroy. After all the man started it, he deserved whatever he got. But it dawned on Brooks that the man's email was actually evidence that he had read the whole book and that was worthy of respect and appreciation. So, he replied to the man kindly, reiterating that careful thought and research had gone into the book, and while they clearly did not agree, Brooks appreciated the man's time and attention to detail.

Fifteen minutes later the man sent a reply, but the tone was entirely different. The man was shocked Brooks had even read his email, and offered the next time Brooks travelled through Dallas they should grab dinner. Here's what Brooks said he learned from that encounter: "contempt is no match for love."<sup>5</sup>

Had Brooks not replied with kindness he would have missed the chance to see in action that "contempt is no match for love." How much more are we missing when we don't act as the children of God by loving our enemies?

### **You and I are called to the deeper righteousness of loving our enemies**

Naturally at this point we might ask, who are the enemies we are required to love:

### **II. We are called to love the people we least want to love.**

As we look again at verse 43-44, you should know the word for "enemies" used here is the most general way of speaking of enemies. It can be used for: personal enemies, military enemies, enemies of God and more. Anyone who could fall into any of those categories for you is someone you are called to love.

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, (Harper Collins, 2019), 19-34.

But it's more challenging than that, because if we pay close attention to be people on the receiving end of "love" in these verses—they are the very people good religious people in Jesus's day would feel most justified in hating.

### ***A. Persecutors***

As we have already seen in v. 44 we are called to pray for those who persecute us. In this scenario the enemy is someone is directly opposed to you, seeking to harm you personally in some way. We are called to love them—by asking God himself to get involved.

Do you pray for your enemies? Not about them, but for them! Not that they would get what you think they deserve" but that God would forgive them, bless them, help them, and draw them to himself?

We are also called to love

### ***B. The Evil & Unjust***

We are to be "sons of the Father" who v. 45:

*For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

God loves the evil and the unjust—and in a very concrete way. The evil and unjust need sun and rain, and God gives it to them because of his love. You and I are called to love our enemies when they are in need.

Illustration:

The Bosnian War of the early 1990s was a time of bitter violence and hatred. But after the war, a story of unusual kindness came to light.

A Serbian man, was arrested by Muslim police and never returned. Five months later, his wife gave birth to a girl, but because of severe food shortages, she was unable to nurse the baby. The family was so desperate they only had tea to give to the baby and after five days, her family knew she was dying like so many other infants already had.

Early on the fifth day, the family heard loud footsteps approaching their door. It was their Muslim neighbor, one of the few people in town who owned a cow. He was wearing black rubber boots and holding a half a liter of milk. Though other Muslims in the town insulted the man telling him to let their enemies die. The man with a cow and heavy black rubber boots, kept showing up on their porch—for 442 days in a row, until the baby and her mother were able to leave the country.<sup>6</sup>

This story resonates deeply with Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, which likewise flips our expectations of "the enemy" by placing the hated Samaritan as the hero loving his enemy the

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor, 2003), pp. 50-53

Israelite. God sends his rain and sun on the evil and unjust, let us too work for the good of our enemies.

### ***C. The Tax Collectors & Gentiles***

Jesus continues his comparison, this time negatively in v. 46-47:

*46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

These are rhetorical questions, the assumption is of course tax collectors and Gentiles do the same. The vast majority of people love people who love them.

But the scandal is who tax collectors and Gentiles are and what they represent to Jesus's first Jewish hearers. Tax Collectors are collaborators with the Roman oppressors. They not only help facilitate Rome's oppressive rule in Judea, but they profit from it as well. Gentiles are not only of a different ethnicity, but their religion is pagan and worthy of derision in the Jewish mind. Together "tax collectors and Gentiles" are viewed by Jesus's first hearers as the absolute worst of the worst.

And Jesus is saying to his first century Jewish hearers, to those obedient, Bible-loving Pharisees, and to all of us who act like them: if all you do is love those who love you, you're as righteous as a profiteering traitor.

If we search our hearts, it's likely that we have our own version of the "tax collectors and Gentiles." People that we view as the worst of the worst: Black Lives Matter activists, Trump Supporters, Illegal immigrants, we probably all have one. And they are the very people we are called to love

Illustration:

This week I remembered the story of a Christian journalist who also is a prolife advocate. She and her pro-choice friend organized a daylong workshop with a conflict-resolution mediator for their organization called Common Ground which exists to bring pro-life and pro-choice advocates into dialogue. At the workshop she was especially impacted by one of the people who shared: "an articulate pro-choicer, a gay rights lawyer with an AIDS lapel pin."

After the meeting as she drives home, she thinks of him. She writes, he has "just lost his job; we'll meet for lunch next week to discuss the group's purpose statement. I wonder how I can help him.... A chasm deeper than the abortion debate, a chasm of faith divides us. I don't know how to bring encouragement to anyone without bringing them to Christ."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Frederica Matthews Green, *Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries Orthodoxy*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 15.

That story stands out to me because at every level it expresses love for people who we would expect to be enemies: having a pro-choice friend, belonging to a group that exists for dialogue between the sides, feeling moved by the words of someone vastly different than I am, wondering how to help the man so different than her. But do we press into relationship, and wonder how we can help? Because of course she is right the only way to bring them ultimate encouragement is to bring them to Christ. But how will tax collectors and Gentiles ever be brought to Christ unless we love our enemies?

**We are called to love the people we least want to love.**

Lastly,

**III. We are called to a whole life commitment to imitate God and love our enemies.**

***A. The whole argument.***

The final verse, v. 48 concludes both our passage, and also the larger section from 5:17-5:48. Having given us six examples of the greater righteousness that comes from the heart, Jesus draws it altogether in v. 48:<sup>8</sup>

*48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

That word “perfect” in Greek can also be translated, and in this case I believe should be, “whole” or “complete.” It is not a call to having a perfect win-loss record in moral performance—we know only Jesus lived his life without sin. Rather, this is a call to be whole, complete, the same person inside all the way out. A person who not only appears to be righteous in their behaviors, but who is truly righteous from the heart.

***B. Whole/Complete as your heavenly Father is complete.***

This is what God is like: there is no gap between what he does and who he really is in his being. It is only the person who is “whole” in that sense who will experience the flourishing Jesus describes. One who embodies the deeper righteousness that begins in the heart and overflows into life.<sup>9</sup> One who is devoted to God from the heart and imitating our loving Father and doing his will.

**Conclusion:**

Loving our enemies doesn’t come naturally to us. We will often be tempted to draw back into defensive, to avoid risk and sacrifice. But consider again, that God does even more than send rain and sun on the just and unjust alike. The Son of God came into our world, and he went to the cross while his enemies reviled him, struck him, and persecuted him. And he loved them, and us, to the end. He welcomed the tax collector and the Gentile, and he welcomes you and me

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<sup>8</sup> We know this is what he’s doing because in our passage he again returns to the language of 5:20 by speaking of righteousness (v. 45) and comparing our lives to others (v. 46-47; cf. 5:20).

<sup>9</sup> In all the instances of the Greek translation of the OT where this word “whole” occurs it means “unblemished, undivided, complete, whole.” Moreover, in Greek and Roman discussions about what it means to live the “good life,” Philosophers like Aristotle used this same word to describe the human being who had achieved what they were designed for and therefore become “complete.” See Pennington, chapter 3 “Teleios.”

through faith in Him. Luke tells us while he hung on the tree he prayed for his persecutors and loved his enemies, crying out (Luke 23:24):

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We are forgiven because Jesus took up his cross in love for his enemies. Therefore let God transform your heart, make you whole, and wholly devote yourself to imitating your Father by loving your enemies. Amen.