

Love Your Enemies

Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 18

HBC 11/22/20

Matthew 5:43-48

In this last of six illustrations, Jesus does the same two things He has done in each of the first five: He shows the **inadequacy of the human-effort** kind of righteousness proclaimed by the Pharisees and **He shows that God deals with the heart**.

In the passage for today, Jesus uses another example in which the Pharisees quoted God's word, despite their abuse of it which resulted in them rationalizing exactly the opposite of what God commands. This time the subject is **love**.

I. The Heresy of the Pharisees (43)

Matthew 5:43: *You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'*

Perversion # 1 is the omission of two words.

Leviticus 19:18: *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.*

Matthew 7:12: *In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

Perversion # 2 is the addition of four words. The perverted version adds the four words **and hate your enemy**, to make the contrast between **neighbor** and **enemy**.

Because of the horrible misinterpretation and the resulting misapplication of God's law, a huge wall of separation was built between Jews and Gentiles. Jews were to be **loved** and Gentiles were to be **hated**. It was a problem that spilled over into the early church when both Jews and Gentiles were saved and suddenly found themselves sharing the most precious thing of all in common.

Beyond the enmity between Jew and Gentile, this abominable twisting of God's word went on to erect barriers even between Jews. In the mindset Jesus was confronting, there were **good** Israelites (which of course the scribes and Pharisees understood to be the *scribes and Pharisees*), and the **bad** Israelites such as tax collectors and the everyday rabble who didn't know all the complexities of the rules and regulations of the scribes and Pharisees. Hatred won't starve when you have a system in place that gives it so much to feed upon.

II. The Character of Real Love (44-47)

Matthew 5:44: *But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

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Maybe it hadn't been said in exactly the terms "love your enemies," but what Jesus was teaching was clearly the accurate heart-application of God's word:

Exodus 23:4–6: *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. You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute.*

Jesus doesn't ask you to do the impossible. He isn't asking you to be **fond of** those who hate you or persecute you. But He does expect you to **act with respect and kindness** toward them. Pray for the salvation of those who oppose you. The best thing in the world to do with an enemy is turn him into a friend. The second best thing is to refuse to escalate a fight. What did Jesus do for us?

Romans 5:8, 10: *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that **while we were yet sinners**, Christ died for us. . . . For if **while we were enemies**, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son . . .*

Loving enemies means **treating them kindly despite your feelings** to the contrary. That shows what you're made of.

Matthew 5:45: . . . *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

So that you may be sons means to **prove** to yourself and to others who see you that you are a true son of the Father in heaven. If you have received Christ, you are by grace a child of God already, but son-like behavior confirms the fact, because children imitate their father.

He causes His sun to rise . . . He sends rain. God's character does not change depending on who is around to see what He does. Neither should yours. True character is rooted in the heart; it is not dependent on who is looking at the moment. If God offers the benefits of what theologians call **common grace** to every person on earth every day, it is certainly appropriate for His children to show His love to their enemies.

Special grace, or efficacious grace is the grace of God which specifically saves individual people, as in "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God . . .*" **Common grace** is the basic goodness of God to all people, as stated in this verse. Since love is an immutable attribute of God and since you are a child of God, it's only to be expected that those who encounter you should encounter a dose of the love of God.

Matthew 5:46: *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*

Tax-gatherers were a despised group among the Jews. Here's the way the system worked. Certain wealthy men paid a sum of money to the Roman government for the privilege of "controlling" the taxation in a certain region. They could levy tolls on exports and imports as well as whatever merchandise passed through the region. And guess who didn't like the idea of Jesus actually caring for tax collectors?

Luke 15:1–2: *Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him [Jesus]. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*

Matthew 5:47: *If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

Jesus was saying that by being exclusive they were proving that they were no better than the ones they so strongly despised, the ones they considered to have no moral or spiritual worth whatsoever. Do you remember the theme Jesus is teaching us? See 5:20.

III. **The Purpose of the Passage** (48)

Matthew 5:48: *Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Perfect is the key word in this verse. It means "brought to completion, full-grown, lacking nothing." You need **righteousness** with completely **surpasses** anything you are able to generate. The concept Jesus taught here was not something new. Remember, He came not to **nullify** the Law, but to **fulfill** it.

Leviticus 19:2: *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."*

Deuteronomy 8:13: *You shall be blameless [perfect] before the Lord your God.*

Does verse 48 mean Jesus taught that a person could reach sinlessness in this life? **Not at all.** If that's the meaning, then He is un-saying what He taught in the beatitudes, and He's contradicting what He was about to teach them about how to pray:

Matthew 6:12-13: *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Application

1. **Why try to become perfect?**

The answer is simple: Because **that is what God commands**. There is no higher or more rewarding path to choose than to come as close as possible to living a life which will cause people to know what Jesus is like. And even though you can't attain perfection

or sinlessness because you are still **groaning**, awaiting the redemption of the body, **what better pursuit can there be than being as good as you can?** Paul's personal testimony sums it up.

Philippians 3:12-16: *Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.*

See the attitude? **I have attained it** (by faith, and by my position in Christ), yet it is still required of me to **live by what I have already obtained**. This is the **upward call** of God in Christ Jesus.

2. **But what's the use, if it's impossible?**

This is another way of seeing this command. Jesus put the standard where it belongs for dealing with a perfectly holy God—**perfection**. And by expounding on what the standard is, Jesus has taken us right back to the point at which He began: **We are totally dependent upon the grace of God to save us**. We can't do it.

Romans 6:23: *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

1 Corinthians 15:1-4: *Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*

Jesus dropped a bomb by saying **unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven**. Now He has given six illustrations of what it means to surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. My friend, **there is only one way it can be done**.

2 Corinthians 5:20–21: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*