

The Heart of Love
Matthew 5:43-48

Please turn in your Bible's to Matthew 5:43-48. This is the sixth of Jesus' teachings on the intent and spirit behind the Law given in the Old Testament. These six are representative of the entire teaching of the Old Testament, but certainly not exhaustive. In this final example Jesus gives, He has certainly saved the best, most difficult, and most shocking for last. Jesus will both give us a radical command to love others, and not just any other but specifically to love our enemies, and at the same time setting before His followers the seemingly impossible standard of being "... *perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.*"

"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."

Today is Mother's Day, so indulge me as I tell a story about my mom (story)

Loving people is hard. It can be hard to love those we actually like, but it's an understatement to say that being called to love your enemy seems nearly impossible. Yet for Jesus' followers that's not only what we are called to do, it's what Jesus has modeled to us Himself in the first place.

Jesus points out a popular teaching of His day, if we're honest it's not so unpopular in our day – "*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy*". To this point, all 5 of the Law's Jesus has discussed are clearly found in the Old Testament. Here, if you've been around the Bible much, you might be saying, this sounds familiar but does God really say hate your enemies? The first half of this statement is found in Leviticus 19:18 and says, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*" For the Jews of the Old Testament and in Jesus' day, they had taken God's command and defined and parsed to make things work best for them, again not unlike ourselves today, taking the parts of God's word we like, but ignoring or relativizing the parts we don't. From this command, a command by the way, Jesus will say in Matthew 22 is part of what sums up the entire Law and Prophets, they took the part they liked – you shall love your neighbor – and ignored the rest. A neighbor was defined as someone who was a **fellow member of the covenant community**. For a Jew this was a fellow Jew, and no one else. To be Jewish was to be a neighbor, a non-Jew was an enemy. Cut and dry. Or so it seems. The command to love your neighbor is clear, but the Jews in addition to adding on and hate your enemy, and hate here needs to be understood in all of the ugly, vile, and loathsome ways it can be used – the Jews also didn't quite like how they were to love their neighbor – they were to love their neighbor as themselves. But notice that that is conveniently left out of their teaching. So I will love my neighbor but only as far as I want to love them – my enemy, who cares they I can hate regardless. Jesus is exposing here **an inference made from partially understanding and applying God's word**.

Loving those I like, loving those I am like, that's easy. But what about those that don't look like me, don't think like me, don't have my political convictions, don't have my religious convictions, what about those that can truly fall into the category of being an enemy, they don't like me, they seek my harm or have already hurt or wronged me, what about when I'm faced with that person – Jesus says, when you love that person, however they might be defined as your enemy, when you love that person or that group of people then you'll understand the very heart of love.

Before we look at verses 44-45, look for a moment at verse 46-47. These are two examples that are simply reiterating the point that loving those that are like us is no big thing. Jesus gives two examples, both for the Jews of

His day that would have clearly been considered enemies; tax collectors and gentiles. Jesus says, “[I]f 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?” Jesus’ point in these examples is two-fold. First to simply point out, **even “my enemy” knows how to love their own**. Tax collectors love tax collectors, gentiles (non-Jews) love gentiles. So put your enemy in the blank: republicans love republicans, democrats love democrats, Muslims love Muslims, gays love gays, conservatives love conservatives, liberals love liberals, atheists love atheists, that guy in the pew five rows in front of me three seats over loves his wife and she loves him, but I ... you get the picture. Even my enemy knows how to love – shocking as I might find it. And so Jesus is saying here, **there’s no reward for doing what’s commonplace**. That’s no big deal to do what everyone else is already doing. So you love those you agree with, like, share common experience with, have a common community around – who doesn’t love those people

But Jesus says, let’s talk about those you loath, you can’t stand. Let’s talk about those that we said earlier, to be angry with is having murdered them in your heart. Let’s talk about those people, let’s talk about your enemies. Jesus says, verse 44, “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” Notice a few things in what Jesus commands. First, we’ve moved from the singular enemy of the Jews, to loving our enemies. It’s a subtle shift and seemingly meaningless, but it speaks to how wide our love as disciples of Jesus is to be to others. As we’ll see in a moment, God doesn’t limit His blessing only to those He likes or loves, many of His blessings are extended to those who hate Him. As Christians **our view of those we are to love needs to broaden to God’s view**. But keep in mind as well, **loving my enemy doesn’t mean I condone my enemies behavior**. I can love the member of ISIS, but not condone in any way the evil behavior they perpetrate. I would argue if I don’t love them, as Jesus says, if I am unwilling to pray for them and at the least for their salvation, can I really call myself a Christian?

Further, it is significant that Jesus coupled praying for our enemies with loving our enemies. This is what I found so profoundly jarring in my own life as my mom would pass that folder every week. How can you pray for dad, he’s hurt you, betrayed you, on and on the thoughts would go, but some of the effects in my mom’s life became transformative for me. When you pray for someone, and pray that God would do go for them, which is what is behind the idea of praying for your enemies – **it’s hard to remain angry with someone I’m praying God’s blessing for**. It’s hard to ask God to save someone, to do good for them, when I harbor and attitude of hate towards them. And what’s worse, when I do that, my enemy isn’t who suffers – I do. I suffer when I hate because the hate and anger and bitterness becomes an infectious cancer in my soul, and the souls of others around me. So Jesus is strategic here in saying don’t just love your enemies, pray for them, ask god to change your heart as you ask Him to change theirs as well. And this is another reason to pray for our enemies – **prayer puts feet to faith, believing God can and will work in the situation**. When I pray for my enemy I acknowledge practically that what is impossible for man is not impossible for God. That what seems lost with men is not lost with God. Praying for my enemy, ultimately, is more about me, because I am bringing my hurts and wrongs and anger and hatred of this person to God’s throne, laying it there, and allowing Him to work in me and to work in the other person. I am seeing myself as I am before God and my enemy as they are before God – that we are equally in need of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ.

And this is what Jesus says, “*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.*”

Christian, Follower of Jesus Christ, Disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, you are God’s son, you are God’s daughter not because you will love your enemies. You are a child of God because you have been born again by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. That is what makes you God’s child. Therefore, **because you are God’s child, I will live and love as God does**. I will be a son or a daughter of my father in heaven. I will imitate God’s love, I will emulate God’s compassion and grace that He gives to those who are His children, whom Jesus

calls the good or the just, and those who are God's enemies, Jesus calls the evil or the unjust. How do we love as God does, love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us in the same spirit and ways that God does?

Look at verse 45, "*For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust.*" Here's the point, **God doesn't limit blessings to His own, even enemies receive good.** God sends the sun and rain to those who curse Him. God gives health and wealth to those who curse Him. He provides protection, provides a home to live on, all manner of blessings to those who would spit in His face if given the opportunity, and profane His name at every opportunity. And Jesus is saying to us, not only are you not to resist the evil person as we looked at last week, not just not passively resist – but actively love.

And this needs to be instructive to us because the bigger picture here is **the picture of God's salvific grace available to any who would believe.** Loving our enemies, praying for our enemies isn't merely a personal issue – it's a gospel issue. Romans 5:10 reminds us that every Christian in this room right now was once an enemy of God, "*... while we were enemies we were reconciled to God in the death of his Son*". You see often I want to withhold loving my enemy until they show me they are worthy of my love, or I want to withhold praying for my enemy until they prove that they are worthy of my prayer. But if God had done that to you, if God had said you are my enemy and I will wait to reconcile you to myself, I will wait to show you my grace until you show me you deserve it – I would still be dead in my sins and bound for Hell, and so would you. Jesus' teaching us to love our enemy, to do the abhorrent according to our culture, to do what we would naturally say is repugnant or detestable, to love an enemy; to pray for an enemy is to elevate the call to discipleship and following Jesus to the standard of being like God Himself.

Verse 48, "*You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect*". Let the weight of that sit for a moment. The heart of love is the heavenly father's heart, but that standard is perfection and nothing less. This is the standard of righteousness Jesus said in 5:20, must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, if we would want to enter the kingdom of heaven. This is a summary statement to this final example – to love our enemies and pray for them, but it is also a summary statement of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The standard is not only high, we're tempted to say that like loving my enemies it's simply an unattainable ideal. But not so fast.

To be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect **is no doubt a command**, that is how it plainly reads in the text and it is the assumption of the text that we will be able to obey it. And as a command we as Christians and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ **are given a goal**: to pursue our heavenly Father's perfection as the goal of our lives. The command is to be an absolute focus of our discipleship to Jesus and dealing with our anger, controlling our lusts, seeking strong marriages when we have entered into marriage, taking our words seriously, not retaliating when we've been wronged, and loving and praying for our enemies are all ways that we pursue to be obedient to this command.

Within being perfect as our heavenly father is perfect **is also a promise.** God's perfecting is not only the goal, our heavenly father is also a divine enabler. We are to look for the divine resources God has given to us to obey this command given to every Christian to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. Some of those resources promised to us are God's word, God's people (the church), prayer, and most importantly the indwelling Holy Spirit who is with us always as the spirit of Christ to the very end of the age. This statement implies a realistically ideal goal that Jesus' disciples are to pursue in this life until we reach our final perfection in eternity.

Who is the enemy you need to love today? Who is the enemy you need to pray for today? May we seek to live out the gospel we have received in Christ as followers of Christ.