

The Sermon on the Mount

Session 7 – “You have heard it said.....” (Part 3) – Matthew 5:43-48

Many would say that these next verses are the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. Commentator William Barclay says that they contain a “concentrated expression of the Christian ethic.” But when we are talking about love, we have to go beyond the theoretical.

There was once a man who always claimed that he loved everybody, especially children. He was known in his neighborhood as a person of a rather affable disposition. One day he had a new cement driveway poured. Late in the afternoon, he came outside to admire the finished work, only to find a couple of children inscribing their initials in the still-wet surface. He yelled, he hollered, and his face turned a bright red. A couple of his neighbors came over to see what the ruckus was all about. Hardly able to speak he was so upset, the man finally explained what had happened. One of the neighbors chided him, “But I thought you always said you love children.” To which the man quickly replied, “I love them in the abstract, not the concrete!”

The real test of Christian love is what it produces in terms of action and how one relates to the unlovable.

Verses 43-47... *You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*

“Hate your enemy” is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. This was a later addition. Leviticus 19:18 says, *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*

1. According to Jesus in verses 44-45, how are we to treat our enemies and why?

In Greek, there are four words for love, only the last two of which are found in the Bible.

- (1) “Eros” – refers to sexual love. It is where we get the English word “erotic”.
- (2) “Storgé” – this is love between family members. Though not in the Bible, the concept is.
- (3) “Philia” – strong affection. It is where we get “Philadelphia – the city of brotherly love.” It is the highest form of love possible on a purely human level.
- (4) “Agapé” – this is a love of the will, not emotions. It is the nature of God’s love for us, and God’s love through us toward others.

The Greek word that is used here – “agapé” – is a reminder of the nature of this kind of love. God’s love is without discrimination, results in action, and takes the initiative, the ultimate demonstration of which is the cross. As Romans 5:8 says, *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Interestingly, throughout the New Testament, when God’s love is mentioned, in the same context you will also find the cross, either explicitly or implicitly. (cf. John 3:16; Galatians 2:20; 1 John 4:10) “Agapé” is also the word that the Apostle John used 35 times in his first letter, which defines love for us in many ways.

The Sermon on the Mount – 7, Matthew 5:43-48

Here are a few things that John said:

1 John 3:16,18...*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

4:7...*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.*

4:11-12...*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

Our love for “enemies” is not just passive, also active. Jesus said that we are to pray for those who persecute us. He was not saying that we should ask for God’s retribution to fall on them or for bad things to happen to them. Rather we should pray that God would heal our attitudes, show us proper responses, and bless those who are at odds with us (see Luke 6:28 and Romans 12:14).

Verse 45...*that you may be children of your Father in heaven...shows that this is related to the Beatitude (5:9) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

2. How might you reflect your Father’s character when you are mistreated? How might we emulate God’s impartiality in practical terms?

“Loving your enemies” might seem like something that is unattainable, and on our own strength, it is. We can only show love in difficult circumstances when we realize, and draw upon God’s love.

Note also that there is a distinction between loving and liking. Commentator James M. Boice writes, “To like someone is to have a certain emotional feeling toward them, and because we cannot entirely control our feelings it is not always possible to like everybody.” As we have already seen, love (agapé) is not a matter of our feelings, but a matter of the will. Boice goes on, “If love depended on our feelings, it would be foolish for Jesus to say... ‘Love your enemies.’ It could not be done. But if love is a matter of the will and if our wills are surrendered to Jesus, it can be done...”

3. What are the implicit commands in verses 46-47? What would this look like in today’s world?

C. S. Lewis in Mere Christianity wrote, “the rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love them. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking them more. If you do them a good turn, you will find yourself disliking them less...” Another important step in beginning to love our enemies is to try to understand them. We never fully know what has taken place in their lives, either as they were growing up or more recently. They may be dealing with a serious problem you know nothing about.

4. Does all this mean that Christians are to be doormats for the world to walk on? Explain.

Someone has said that in addition to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there is a fifth gospel, “the gospel according to you.” So many people have come to believe in the truth of Christianity by watching the behavior of believers.

The Sermon on the Mount – 7, Matthew 5:43-48

An anonymous poet has written,
If none but you in the world today
Had tried to live the Christlike way,
Could the rest of the world look close at you
And find the path that is strait and true?
 If none but you in the world so wide
 Had found the Christ for his daily guide,
 Would the things you do and the things you say
 Lead others to live in His blessed way?
Ah, friends of the Christ, in the world today
Are many who watch you upon your way,
And look to the things you say and do
To measure the Christian standard true:
 Many read and admire the Gospel of Christ
 With its love so unfailing and true,
 But what do they say and what do they think
 Of the gospel according to you?
You are writing each day a letter to all
Take care that the writing is true;
'Tis the only gospel that some will read,
That gospel according to you.

5. How was Jesus himself an example of the principles “Do not resist an evil person” and “Love your enemies”?

Jesus' disciple, Peter, wrote, *He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth. When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted himself to Him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed.* (1 Peter 2:22-24)

Verse 48...*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

This verse is the conclusion of the five “you have heard that it was said...but I tell you...” teachings of Jesus. On the surface, it is rather startling. How can we hope to be perfect? Let's look at the answer to that question.

We need to look at two important things that we learn from the original Greek sentence in Scripture. But first, let's turn to the Old Testament and see the concept of “perfection” there, since this is what the audience of Jesus would know.

** “Tamyim” meant “without defect or blemish”. It was used of the animals brought for sacrifice in the temple (see Exodus 12:5).

This word is also the one used in Psalm 18:30-32:

As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless.

He is a shield for all who take refuge in Him.

For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?

It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.

The Sermon on the Mount – 7, Matthew 5:43-48

** "Shalem" meant "whole or complete". This is perfection in a positive sense. It is related to the Hebrew word "shalom" meaning peace, but also well-being or wholeness.

1 Kings 8:61 in the King James Version says, *Let your heart therefore be perfect with the LORD our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this day.* The New Revised Standard Version translates this verse: *Therefore devote yourselves completely to the Lord our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day.* Thus, to be "perfect" is to "devote yourselves completely".

** In the New Testament, we find the word for "perfect" (and the one used here) in the Greek is "teleios" – having reached full potential, what it is intended to be, or complete in moral character. A sacrifice was "teleios" if it passed inspection. A woman or man who had reached their full stature was "teleios" as compared to a child. A student was "teleios" when they had a thorough grasp of a subject. In other words, not half way – like the "love" of the teachers of the law who taught love, but only of certain people.

If I had a screw somewhere in my home that needed tightening, I would go to my tool chest and get a screwdriver. But among the several types and sizes I have, I would need to get one that was "teleios" – appropriate and fitted for the task.

The other thing that we need to remember at this point is the context of this verse. (In real estate, the saying is "Location, location, location." In Bible study and interpretation, the truth is "Context, context, context"!)

Jesus' call for his hearers to "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" comes after the increased moral standards of the "you have heard it said, but I say to you" statements. So Jesus is saying, that there should be nothing lacking in terms of all we are to be, with no blemishes. "In short, [we are] to be as blameless as the Lord Jesus Christ." (Boice)

But wait, you say! What about Romans 3:23 – "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"? The word for "sinned" was an archery term meaning, "to miss the mark". (Having participated in competitive archery, I know about that!) So God's standard is a bulls-eye. Let me quote James Boice again, "Nothing that you will ever do will be perfect. Only what God does is perfect. Hence, if you are to reach the perfection which God requires, it must be as the result of His working for you and in you."

This is not something that we can achieve on our own strength. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:3, NASB)... *Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected (teleios) by the flesh? Or, as the NIV has it, Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*

Fortunately, we have the assurance of Jesus (Luke 18:27, NLT) that "*What is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God.*"

If we go back to the end of the passage above from Psalm 18, we see that...*It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.*

How does God do that? It is through the redeeming work of Christ. This is how it is described in Hebrews 10:10-14...*And what God wants is for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time.* ¹¹*Under the old covenant, the priest stands before the altar day after day, offering sacrifices that can never take away sins.* ¹²*But our High Priest offered Himself to God as one sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then He sat down at the place of highest honor at God's right hand.* ¹³*There He waits until His enemies are humbled as a*

The Sermon on the Mount – 7, Matthew 5:43-48

footstool under his feet. ***14For by that one offering He perfected forever all those whom He is making holy.***

But also, as we submit ourselves to God in this life, bit by bit we are “sanctified”... that is, “conformed to the likeness of His Son...” (Romans 8:29; see also Philippians 3:12), which is moving toward perfection that will be fully attained as God perfects us completely in all ways at the moment of our death.

What God began in you at the time of your salvation, He will carry through to completion. *Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

(Philippians 1:6)

God doesn't begin something that He doesn't intend to finish!

