



## **Matthew 5:43-48: WHY WE MUST LOVE OUR ENEMIES**

Loving our enemies represents one of the most radical of the ethical teachings of Jesus. He calls his followers to do something others would never require of them. From the distance, we see the pure virtue of such a command, and we would even cheer heartily for those that have demonstrated such an ethic in their lives.

I have a friend who is going through a divorce after twenty years of marriage. At stake is everything, as her soon to ex-husband is demanding custody of their seven children. For her, life is filled with hurt, anger, stress, and regret that after twenty years of marriage it has to end with such hatred for one another. It was not supposed to end like that when they both uttered, "I do" from the wedding altar.

Yet Jesus instructs us to love those that persecute us. It is easy to appreciate that teaching from a distance, quite another thing to live out that virtue when someone is attempting to take away the most important things you cherish in life. As we study this section, some may think the task Jesus requests is impossible. But Jesus would never demand from us something we cannot do. As we look through this passage, three areas will help us move toward this state of mind. First, we have to change the perceptions we have adopted. Secondly, we know God's heart. Thirdly, we must adopt God's ethical ideals.

Let us look at the first issue. We must change the perceptions we have adopted in life.

**43 "You have heard that it was 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, 45 so that  
you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.**

As we look at this text, it is important to state that nowhere in the Bible does it say God's people should hate their enemies. Yet, this false teaching had become part the "oral tradition," which are teachings that had been passed down verbally from the religious leaders of that day. Notice, Jesus does not begin here by saying, "it is written," which would refer to Scripture, he simply corrects what they "have heard" from others. It is just a reminder that you cannot always take to heart what a Christian leader says, instead you have a responsibility to see if their teaching corresponds with the Bible. There are many Christians today, who likewise carry perceptions of what they believe is true based on what they heard.

Speaking of perceptions, one of the greatest challenges facing newer Christian is to replace what they have once held as "true" and replace it with the biblical standards God has established when it comes to man, morality, and God. Ethical teachings like no sex before marriage, no divorce when married, and loving your enemies goes against perceptions they once held as true. It is quite a challenge to make these ethical adjustments, especially if one is single, or involved in a bad marriage, or in the midst of dealing with people who seek to take vengeance against them.

Now you cannot just tell someone that hatred is just like murder, or that lusting in your heart after someone is equivalent to anger, or that we should pray for evil men, such as Osama Bin Laden. Instead, God must show you it is wrong through the Scriptures and Holy Spirit conviction. You see, God does not want us to think too highly of ourselves. He does not want us to look down on people and scoff that we are better than them. Instead he wants us to demonstrate the type of humility that understands we ourselves are not so far away from being murderers and adulators ourselves. The process that begins at conversion is the path that leads

from being self-focused to God focused. It is this path that reveals that we ourselves were once enemies of God, and we demonstrated this by ignoring Him and living life by our own standards, or else we shook our fist at him in defiance and cursed Him. Yet God loves us anyway and sends Jesus to die as our substitute.

The great perception adjuster is for followers of Jesus to be God focused, not self focused. We are called to live our life based on His truth standards, not our own. When we understand God as a suffering God and realize we are just as capable of doing evil like our enemies, we recognize that since God loved us, we begin to recognize that likewise we must also love back, even when it hurts. In the end, God will change us into the kind of people we never thought we could become. We become more like Him.

This brings us to the second point. God does not call us to do something He is not doing himself. You see this in the following verse.

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

What Jesus is saying, of course, is that God loves his enemies. In an agricultural society, sunshine and rain represent the necessities to sustain life. There are millions of people who deny God, or worship other gods, or are antagonistic against God, or completely ignore God and make up their own rules, or even worse, those who kill His followers, yet God does not cease to provide for them.

Theologians refer to such provision as common grace. Grace that is bestowed on everyone without restriction. The word, grace, of course, refers to unmerited favor. Other examples of common grace include nature, the ability to love and think, and the spirit of life, which He has bestowed on each of us, despite having done anything to earn it.

No one woke up one morning and said, "Okay, God I have been a great follower, given to the poor, helped those in need, now I deserve for you to create sunshine, provide rain, allow me to have oxygen, sustain my life, etc., etc." God has chosen to love us by giving us the basic things we need for life, based on His own goodness.

Now there are some of us who might think, why does God do that to people that hate him? People who are His enemies! It is because from His perspective we are not so different. There was a time we wanted nothing to do with Him, yet He continued to give us life in hope that we would change. Likewise, God wants His enemies to change today. He wants your enemies to change.

Timothy Keller, a pastor of a great church in the middle of Manhattan, where thousands of liberal New Yorkers have come to Christ, once said, that we must not think of ourselves as better than other people. We are not much different. He goes on to use an example from chemistry. If you look through a microscope you will see thousands of cells. Some of them will be bigger than others, but the difference in size means nothing to the person looking through the microscope because ultimately they are all cells. Likewise, some of us may think we are better than others, maybe even think we are a hundred times better. Maybe we have this big journal which lists all the accomplishments we have done for the name of God. Yet, when God looks through the microscope, He sees cells that are very similar that if given more time, could allow a bad cell to merge with the divine until it is well.

Ultimately, Romans 5:7-8 says it all. "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—<sup>a</sup>but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

You must understand, God does not call us to do something He does not already do.

Lastly, God wants us to actively incorporate His standards in life. He wants us to be different and represent what the true kingdom heart looks like.

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

The word, *perfect*, here is better understood as “mature, or whole.” It essentially expresses the idea of loving without limits. A perfect Christian is not one who primarily knows his or her Bible, or spends hours in prayer. A perfect Christian primarily deals with someone who loves others like God loves them.

Ultimately, Jesus wants us to be different as his kingdom followers. In this section, Jesus lists two notorious enemies of the Jews, the tax collectors and the Gentiles. His point is simple, as wicked as some of the folks can be, they still have the capacity to love and greet those of similar nature. In other words, if we stick to our own kind, we are no different from those who are our enemies. He want us to raise the bar and love our enemies.

Some of you might be thinking, how in the world will I be able to apply this to that ex-spouse, or family member, or co-worker, or former best friend who betrayed me. Every time we come into contact, an argument ensues with much hatred and venom. I have discovered for myself the proverb in the OT to be true. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1).”

When a child becomes a teenager, ultimately you will have one of those conversations where they utter “I hate you.” When this happens in general one responds in three ways. One method is to simply withdrawal and not engage in such a conversation. Perhaps, you have been there and realize, that it is best not to become emotionally involved. Unfortunately, this will never solve the conflict. The teenager will mostly conclude they are right in their assessment.

The second approach is to engage them head on. To match accusations. To match the tone of the others voice. When this happens both parties become heated and will most likely make the situation even worse. It will most likely add some more hatred for the next encounter.

The third approach is to respond to the complaint gently, but truthfully. To prepare yourself for the onslaught that will most likely take place regarding your character. In such a scenario, you must do everything in your power to bear it and gently and truthfully state, “I want to work this out. I do not want to fight with you, I want us to come to some sort of a resolve. If they attack you again, pray and ask God to provide you the supernatural ability through the Holy Spirit to bear the barrage of insults and continue to gently state the truth in love. In the end, this will provide you the best chance to win them over to your love. That is the pattern of Jesus. Though they mock him, though they shake their fist at them, though the enemies of God murder him. He hangs on the cross and asks God to forgive them. Ultimately, it was this kind of approach that eventually wore us down and responded to him.

I want to close with a quote from a sermon by Martin Luther King Jr in 1957. During the highly emotional civil rights movement, he had this to say about those who sought to oppress the blacks.

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory."