

Jesus on the Law

PART 8: NEIGHBORS VS. ENEMIES • MATTHEW 5:43-48

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It is good to be together this morning! I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway, as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning, and then Caleb/Chris will be leading us in our songs before we dismiss [for class].

As some of you know, I hope to head out this afternoon, to attend the Bear Valley Bible Lectures in Denver. You usually send me to the Freed-Hardeman Lectures in February every year, I usually go to Polishing the Pulpit on my own every August, but both of those were cancelled. Bear Valley is one of the few that hasn't been cancelled so far. So, I hope to be in Denver for the first week and then the following week take the scenic route home through the Olympic Peninsula to see my sister. I am thankful in advance for Clayton offering to preach next week. And then, the following week, we hope to hear a message from the future, a message from Brett Rutherford, who preached here in Madison from 1997 until he moved back to Australia in 2000. But thank you for allowing me to be away a bit, and thank you for remembering me in your prayers.

As we begin today, we are very briefly summarizing God's plan of salvation on the wall up here: In response to the good news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, we obey that good news by turning away from sin, confessing Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried with the Lord in baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And, as usual, we do have some good news this morning! The first one comes to us from the Lord's church in Gulf Shores, Alabama, where Tyler Gilreath preaches. Tyler posted a few days ago and he says, "The angels are rejoicing. Jimmy Foster was baptized today! So proud of him and of Em Lang. Brother Em (one of our Shepherds) has been encouraging and studying with Jimmy for a long time. I know Janet, Jimmy's wife, is beyond happy. She has waited for this for over 60 years. Hallelujah!" So, if you have been married for 60 years and your spouse has not yet obeyed the gospel, there is still hope. And I would add: If you happen to be watching or listening this morning, and if you are married to a Christian, even for many years, but if you have not yet obeyed the gospel yourself, we would invite you to take that step today. Get in touch with one of our shepherds, like Jimmy did, and we would be more than happy to meet at your home to study together.

And then we also have some good news from Tennessee this week. This update comes from Jane Jones, and this is what she says, "Oh Happy Day ... when Jesus washed my sins away!!! After 84 years my daddy decided to be baptized into Christ. I have to be honest - I never thought I would see this day. A special thanks to Mike McDaniel, preacher at the Caruthersville Church of Christ and the staff and administration of Cane Creek Rehab

in Martin, Tennessee, for working together and making this happen. After years of sincere kindness and personal interest in daddy, he requested that Mike baptize him. What a sweet day!" Amen to that! Now, we also have a cattle trough in our backyard that we have used for several baptisms through the years. But, it has been a long time since I've seen a lift used in this way. If you want the cattle trough experience, give me a call; or, we can do it here (in our baptistery downstairs) or in one of our local lakes or rivers, a pool, anywhere we can find enough water for an immersion. We would encourage you to follow this man's example, hopefully sooner, rather than later.

As most of you know, we are wrapping up a series of lessons where we are looking at what Jesus has to say about the Law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. He did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it, and he gives the warning that to enter the kingdom of heaven, our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Scribes and the Pharisees. With this in mind, we've been working our way through a series of examples, where Jesus takes what the people had heard about the Law, and he clarifies and corrects a number of misunderstandings. He's dealt with murder, adultery, divorce, the making of vows, and the idea of revenge. And in each of these areas, Jesus raises the bar, as he explains the kind of righteousness that's needed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

This week, we come to the last little chunk of Matthew 5, and we come to what the people had heard about how we need to be treating our friends and neighbors as opposed to our enemies. As we get started today, I would invite you to try to think of how many friends you have in your life right now. Or, how many friends have you had in your lifetime? And I know, it might depend on how we define "friend," but how long would it take us to try to come up with a list of friends? We could probably spend a while thinking of all the friends we've had. On the other hand, what if I were to ask us to think of how many enemies we've had? I don't know about all of you, but I can come up with a pretty short list fairly quickly. Thankfully, at least as far as I know, my friends vastly outnumber my enemies.

Well, as we think about our enemies, as we think about these people who either hate us or perhaps try to make our lives miserable for some reason, let's return to Matthew 5, and let's conclude this series of lessons by looking at what the Lord says about how we respond to our enemies – Matthew 5:43-48, the words of Jesus,

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; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

So again, we have what these people had heard, and then we have Jesus raising the bar.

I. Jesus starts in verse 43, "YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AND HATE YOUR ENEMY.'"

The first part of this is fairly accurate; a bit out of context, but accurate. In Leviticus 19:18, the Lord said, ***"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."*** So, they did leave off the ***"as yourself"*** part, but the quote is accurate,

“You shall love your neighbor.” In Greek and in English, the word ***“neighbor”*** refers to someone who is “near.” In Hebrew, the word in Leviticus 19:18 refers to a “friend.” So, in general, a “friend,” someone who is “close” or “nearby.”

As far as I can tell, though, the other part of what these people had heard is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament. At no point does God ever give the command to ***“hate your enemy.”*** It’s not there. So, where does that come from? Most likely, these people read the command to ***“love your neighbor,”*** and since God specified ***“neighbor,”*** they figured that everybody else was excluded from that command. So, they saw it as “love your neighbor ONLY.” They took this as permission to hate anybody who wasn’t a neighbor! And by the time we get to Jesus, the religious leaders are having huge debates over the definition of ***“neighbor.”*** This is why the lawyer in Luke 10 asks Jesus, ***“Who is my neighbor?”*** He knows he needs to love his neighbor, but he is a bit concerned about that ***“neighbor”*** part, ***“Who is my neighbor?”*** And in response, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and allows the lawyer to see for himself what it really means to be neighborly.

But, this is what these people had heard, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”***

- II. In the rest of this passage, Jesus **RAISES THE BAR**, ***“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*** As we study what the Lord says here, I’d like to break it down to three questions: **WHO**, **HOW**, and **WHY** do we love?

- A. So, let’s start by looking at the **WHO**? Who are we to love?

Obviously, we love our ***“neighbors”*** – most will agree to that, but the issue here is ***“ENEMIES,”*** ***“But I say to you, love your enemies.”*** When I first read this as a kid, I remember thinking: Well, that’s weird – I don’t really have any enemies! And that’s true. When we’re nine, we’re probably not too concerned about having enemies. But then I grew up. And over time, most of us have come to understand that we do indeed, have enemies. Certainly, we have enemies as a nation, but what the Lord says here seems a bit more personal, doesn’t it? These aren’t enemies in some far-off place, but these are people we know. I’m thinking of what Jesus will say a bit later, in Matthew 10:34-36, when he says, ***“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN’S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.”*** So, because of what we believe, Jesus says that those who are closest to us might turn against us, even within our own families. Like some of you, I remember baptizing a young woman maybe 15 years ago. As she came up out of the water, she said something like, “189.” I don’t remember the exact number, but it was the number of days until she could legally leave home. Her parents were severely harassing her for her decision to obey the gospel. They perhaps saw it as condemning the family religion. This is what Jesus is talking about here. The gospel will turn people against each other.

Right here in the immediate context (in verse 44), Jesus describes these people as those who ***“persecute”*** us. So, these people are ***“enemies,”*** not because WE hate THEM, but because THEY hate US. We aren’t going after them, but they are pursuing us. Earlier in this sermon, Jesus refers to this in verse 11, when he says, ***“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.”*** We have a somewhat parallel account over in Luke 6:27-28, where Jesus says, ***“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”***

So, our **“enemies”** here are those who **“hate”** us, those who **“curse”** us, those who **“mistreat”** us, those who harass us in some way.

I’m thinking of what Peter said in 1 Peter 4, when he referred to our former way of life, back when we **“...pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.”** **“In all this,”** Peter says, our friends from that former way of life, **“... are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you.”** So, people we thought were our friends, are shocked that we don’t do those things anymore, and they cut on us, they slander us. These are the **“enemies”** Jesus is speaking of here – not that we hate them, but they hate us. These are not just people we don’t get along with, but these are people who are actively trying to hurt us. This is the **“WHO?”**

B. As we continue applying this passage to our lives today, let’s notice the **“HOW?” of this passage.**

What does it mean to **“love”** our enemies? In our culture, we usually think of **“love”** as a feeling. We “fall in love” with somebody. We “love” camping, because we enjoy being in the woods. We “love” ice cream, because it tastes good. We “love” cheese, because cheese is awesome! The word Jesus uses here, though, is more of a decision than a feeling. The **“love”** Jesus describes in this passage is a sacrificial, selfless decision to do what is best for another person. In the Bible, this kind of **“love”** is often a decision to give. In John 3:16, for example, God so loved the world that he **“gave”** his one and only Son. In Ephesians 5, we are told to imitate God and **“walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for us.”** Love, then, is a decision to sacrifice ourselves for another. In this case, love is not a feeling, but love is a decision to do something. I do find it interesting that we are not commanded to “like” our enemies, but we are commanded to **“love”** them. There is a difference.

In this passage, in the immediate context, loving our enemies involves **“greeting”** them, doesn’t it? In verse 47, Jesus describes those who greet only their brothers. The implication is: We also need to be greeting our enemies as well. We don’t avoid them, we don’t screen their calls, we don’t look the other way when we pass in the halls, but we start by saying “hello.” We don’t FEEL like saying “hello,” but we DECIDE to say “hello.” We are to greet our enemies, not just our friends. Beyond this, going back to the parallel passage in Luke 6:27, we **“do good to those who hate,”** [and we] **“bless those who curse.”** We **“do good,”** even when we don’t feel like it. We make a decision to overrule our emotions.

And in terms of loving our enemies, this is not a new command. In fact, we have an interesting reference from the Law of Moses in Exodus 23:4-5, where the Law says, **“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.”** I had forgotten about that! Human me sees my enemy’s donkey wandering out in the middle of nowhere, and the human me says, “Hey, free donkey!” Human me says, “Oh, my enemy lost his donkey; too bad, so sad!” Love, though, is a decision to interrupt my day and to return that donkey to my enemy. That is the loving thing to do. I don’t; feel like it, but I do it anyway.

This is continued in the New Testament, not just here, but in Romans 12:20-21, where Paul says, **“BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.”** **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** This was Paul’s attitude in 1 Corinthians 4:11-13, where he says, **“To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when**

we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. It's the attitude commanded by Peter in 1 Peter 4:8-9, where he says, ***"To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."*** Love is not a feeling, but love is a decision to do something.

The other part of this is that we not only ***"love"*** our enemies, but we ***"pray"*** for our enemies as well. We pray like Jesus and Stephen, who both prayed that God would forgive and be merciful to those who were putting them to death. We pray for those who persecute us. I don't know whether you have experienced this personally, but I have found that it's hard to hate somebody I'm praying for. It's a strange thing! When I take somebody's name to God in prayer, it's really hard to hate them at the same time.

To love, then, is a decision. As I was preparing for today's lesson, I ran across a quote from Pearl Buck, "You cannot make yourself feel something you do not feel, but you can make yourself do right in spite of your feelings." And she's right. I may never have the same feelings toward my enemies that I have toward those in my own family, but I can make a decision to do what is best for them. I can love, and I can pray, and if I don't, who will? We treat them with love and respect, even when they don't deserve it. We do the right thing, even when we don't feel like it. Jesus, then, once again, raises the bar.

So, we've discussed the WHO (we are to love our enemies), we've looked at the HOW (we make a decision to do good, often in spite of our feelings), and now we move on to the WHY...

C. **...WHY are we to love our enemies? What is our motivation?**

Thankfully, in verse 45, Jesus tells us why, doesn't he? We do this, ***"...so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."*** We love our enemies, because God loves his enemies. And notice the example Jesus gives, ***"...for he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."*** Instead of only loving those who are loveable, instead of only loving those who are good, God blesses everybody. One thing I notice here is how Jesus describes the sun as ***"his sun."*** Not "the" sun, but ***"His"*** sun. The sun belongs to God; it is ***"his."*** Several weeks ago, in our Wednesday class, we looked at Paul's sermon in Lystra, where he spoke to the local pagans, in that "Not Gods, But Men," passage. Paul said, ***"...[we] preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."*** God, then, gives rain even to those who turn away. He blesses the evil and the good.

Anybody can be good to nice people. Well, okay, most people can be good to nice people. Some people are just mean. But generally speaking, we are nice to those who are nice to us. God, though, is good to all people, even to those who are awful. And to demonstrate that we are his children, God wants us to do the same. As humans, we tend to almost barter and trade: If you are good to me, I will be good to you. But God is good, even to his enemies, blessing them with sunshine and rain.

I love how the Lord uses the examples of the tax collectors and the Gentiles! He's speaking to the Pharisees here, who saw themselves as morally superior, but the Lord basically says, "You guys are no better than the

Gentiles and tax collectors. Even they are nice to their friends.” [paraphrased] Jesus then, raises the bar. We are to love just as God loves.

And again at the end (in verse 48), Jesus says, ***“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*** The reference here isn’t to sinless perfection, but the word Jesus uses refers to being “complete,” or, “mature,” fulfilling our purpose. When we love our enemies, we are doing what God wants us to do. That’s the WHY? of this passage – we love our enemies so that we can be like our Father in Heaven.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of this passage, I don’t know who your enemies are. You may have somebody always pressuring you to do something wrong. You may have somebody who always seems to be out to make your life miserable. You may have somebody who has really done you wrong. They have harmed you in some way. Some of you know we’ve been dealing with a real hassle in our family over the past week or so. We got an unsolicited debit card in the mail, and that debit card was linked to a checking account in my wife’s name. Well, that’s pretty weird. We don’t have any accounts at that bank. So, I called the bank that issued the card, and someone had opened an account using my wife’s name and date of birth. This sent us down a path of spending literally hours on hold. It’s led to a police report. It’s led to putting a fraud alert on our credit reports. Then, a day or two later, we got a notice that our personal loan request had been turned down. We hadn’t applied for a personal loan! This led to several more days of phone calls. This thing keeps getting worse. I’m not saying this is persecution of some kind, but I will confess, I have thought some pretty bad thoughts about some of my fellow human beings this week.

So, I don’t know who your enemies are. Maybe you’ve been lied about, or cheated, or hurt in some way. But the Lord’s advice in this chapter is not to retaliate, but to do good. It’s not a feeling, but we are to do what that person truly needs to have done. Or if we don’t have any enemies right now, maybe we could simply do something good for a stranger, something generous and unexpected, expecting nothing in return. Perhaps we could reach out to someone completely outside our circle of friends and do something sacrificial, something helpful. By making a choice to love instead of hate, we show the world that we are children of our Father.

With this, before we partake of the Lord’s Supper together, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, the God who blesses all people with life, and breath, and all things. You share your rain and your sun with all of us, even when we make choices that let you down. You know that we live in a broken and sinful world. We are surrounded by suffering, and pain. As human beings, we do some terrible things, things we regret. We ask for your forgiveness. As we live in this fallen world, people will do some terrible things to us. Sometimes, people are against us. As we are sinned against, we pray that our first reaction would not be revenge or retaliation, but love, doing what is truly best for everyone – toward our friends and our enemies alike. As we go back to our homes, to work, and to school this week, we pray that we will represent you well. We want the world to know that we are your children.

We are thankful for those who are visiting with us this morning. We pray for safe travels.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com