

Sons of Your Father

Matthew 5:43-48

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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Worship: God's Love For Sinners

Key Sentence: When we love and pray for our enemies we become like our Father.

Outline:

I. The comprehensive command (Matthew 5:43-44)

II. The divine bar (Matthew 5:45)

III. The human par (Matthew 5:46-47)

IV. The unreachable standard (Matthew 5:48)

Matthew 5:43–48 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

⁴⁵so 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.

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

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Sons of Your Father Matthew 5:43-48

Of Gods and Men is a movie based on the true story of eight French Trappist monks in a little monastery in Algeria. The country was in a civil war between Islamic radicals and the national government. It quickly became deadly for foreigners. The local and French governments insisted that the monks leave. But the monks were humbly serving the Muslim people of a small village south of Algiers. They were part of the community. “We may be leaving.” “Why are you leaving.” “We are like birds on a branch. We don’t know if we will leave.” “We are the birds. You are the branch. If you leave we lose our footing.” Part of serving the community was medical. The old doctor cared for up to 150 people a day, including some of the terrorists. “The villagers may talk about these men we help. Be careful.” “Throughout my career I’ve met all sorts of different people. Including Nazis. And even the devil. I’m not scared of the terrorists. Or even the army. And I’m not scared of death. I’m a free man. Let the free man through.” In the end all eight monks stayed to love their enemies. They were kidnapped, held captive, and then killed.

The Sermon on the Mount is the real deal. Obedience to it can have consequences. And this week we come to what Stott called the high point of the Sermon “for which it is most admired and most resented.” He said “Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling.” Last week’s text talked about how we respond to persecution, ill-treatment and even imposition. We respond not with retaliation, but with love, seeking to overcome evil with good. In this week’s text Jesus summarizes those teachings with a comprehensive command, and then shows us how, following God’s ways and not our own, we can become more like our heavenly Father. When we love and pray for our enemies we become more like our Father.

Let’s begin with the text. Matthew 5:43-48 “*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 makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.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.*”

This clearly builds on and even summarizes what we heard Jesus say last week: turn the other cheek; give your cloak as well as your tunic; go the second mile; give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the one who borrows from you: these are all acts of love and arguably all done toward someone who could be called your enemy. So now Jesus makes this comprehensive and clear. “You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” Actually the Scripture never said “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” It did say “Love your neighbor,” in Leviticus 19:18, and this was the command that Jesus would call the second greatest of all.

But Scripture never adds "hate your enemy." Neither do the writings of the rabbis, though they may have spoken more strongly than they wrote. The Qumran documents do say this kind of thing. Most people in Israel, like most people in a fallen world, probably assumed that if you have to love your neighbor, at least you get to hate your enemy. Some of the Psalms, called the imprecatory or evil-evoking Psalms, would seem to support that, except they were directed toward God as righteous judge rather than acted toward others. Scripture is not silent about loving your enemies. Exodus 23:4 says “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. ⁵If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.” Proverbs says “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,” which Paul uses to encourage overcoming evil with good.

Our own culture, I believe, supports the “hate your enemies” side of this. In political and cultural debates of last year, it was rare to find a statement of goodwill toward anybody, but the intense, bitter, vindictive, and judgmental claims about the opposition were easy to find. Again, you don’t need me to give you examples. If you’ve scrolled Facebook, you’ve seen the merciless, malicious rhetoric hurled even between so-called friends having a “civilized” debate. Kent Hughes quotes an anonymous poet who captures this culture “Believe as I believe, no more, no less; That I am right, and no one else, confess; Feel as I feel, think only as I think; Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink; Look as I look, do always as I do; Then, and only then, will I take sides with you.”

Jesus will have none of this. Verse 44: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This is how he raises the bar on loving our neighbor. As the story of the good Samaritan shows, our neighbor is not just a member of our religion or ethnicity. He or she may not have any connection with us at all. He or she may be our enemy, in every sense of that word. What makes him our neighbor is simply that he is a fellow human being in need, whose need we know and we are in a position to help in some way.

What does it mean to love your enemy? When Jesus teaches this in Luke he expands on it helpfully. Luke 6:27–28 “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” “Do good” to show agape love to your enemy. Hughes tells the story of a woman whose family had just returned from the mission field and rented a rather nice townhouse. At least, nice compared to what they’d had on the mission field. A creative person, this woman did a wonderful job decorating the place, and they settled in. Only one thing was wrong: the family who moved in next door. They turned the front yard into a desert, broke the windows out, were always using foul language, urinated in the front yard, and generally caused havoc. The final straw was when one of the boys came into her yard and threw a whole can of orange paint over the patio walls. She was angry. She did not like her neighbors. She was angry with the Lord. But she recognized it, got down on her knees and said, “Lord, you know that I do not like these people at all. God, help me to love them.” Then she resolved to express love. She baked her neighbors a pie and took it to them, thus beginning a caring relationship. Those neighbors had not changed, but she had, and they accepted her practical love. When those neighbors moved away, she wept.

C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: “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 him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less....” Corrie ten Boom often told a story about a man she met in Africa. The man had bandaged hands, and when she asked how he had been injured, he said, “My neighbor’s straw roof was on fire; I helped him to put it out.” “Later,” she says “I heard the whole story. The neighbor hated him and set his roof on fire while his wife and children were asleep. He was able to put out the fire in his house, but sparks flew over and set his enemy’s roof on fire. So this Christian ran over and did everything he could to put out his neighbor’s house. That is how his own hands were burned. . . .out of love for his enemy.”

Similarly “bless those who curse you.” Imagine this too, in a social media situation, or even face to face. The words of anger, criticism or condemnation that are spoken to you are met with blessing. Stott says “If they call down disaster and catastrophe upon our heads, expressing in words their wish for our downfall, we must retaliate by calling down heaven’s blessing upon them, declaring in words that we wish them nothing but good.” Can you wish you enemy nothing but good? Can you even speak blessing on those who you wouldn’t call enemies, but who you don’t see eye-to-eye with or always agree with?

The key is prayer. Matthew 5, like Luke 6, says “pray for those who persecute you” Chrysostom, an early Christian preacher, saw this responsibility to pray for our enemies as ‘the very highest summit of self-control’. Many others have seen such intercession as the summit of Christian love. “This is the supreme command,” wrote Bonhoeffer. “Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.” Such prayer increases our love for this enemy. It is impossible to pray for someone without loving him, and impossible to go on praying for him without discovering that our love grows and matures. So don’t wait to pray for someone until you feel some love for them in your heart. Begin to pray before you are aware of loving them, and you will find the love growing of its own accord. Jesus seems to have prayed for his tormentors while the iron spikes were being driven through his hands and feet: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” The Greek tense there suggests that he kept praying, kept repeating his entreaty. If the cruel torture of crucifixion could not silence our Lord’s prayer for his enemies, what pain or pride justifies the silencing of ours?

A. F. C. Villmar, writing in 1880, was Bonhoeffer’s mentor: “This commandment, that we should love our enemies and forgo revenge will grow even more urgent in the holy struggle which lies before us ... Christians will be hounded from place to place, subject to physical assault, maltreatment and death. We are approaching an age of wide-spread persecution ... Soon the time will come when we shall pray ... a prayer of earnest love for these ... who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred ... the Church, waiting for its Lord, must fling itself with its utmost power ... into this prayer of love.”

This is the summary command, the comprehensive command for this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. We’ll come back to this and work on some application in a few minutes, but first let’s look quickly at God’s standard, the divine bar, and normal human performance, the human par, as in “par for the course.”

“Love your enemies,” verse 45, “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.” If you impartially show practical love to your enemies as well as to friends, you will be imitating God, who shows his love by sending sun and rain on both the righteous and unrighteous. Theologians call this God’s ‘common grace’. It is not ‘saving grace,’ enabling sinners to repent, believe and be saved; but grace shown to all mankind, believers and unbelievers alike. This common grace of God is expressed, not in salvation but in the gifts of creation, in the blessings of rain and sunshine, without which we could not eat and life on the planet could not continue.

This is to be our standard. We are to do good even to our enemies, making sure they are not hungry or thirsty, cold or homeless. When we do this, following God's example of love, we show ourselves to be "sons of our Father."

In verses 46 and 47 Jesus contrasts this love to ordinary human affection, the human "par for the course." "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?" Unredeemed sinners can love. Parental love, family love, marital love, love of friends—all these are real even for those outside Christ. The Jews who worked as corrupt, ungodly tax collectors for the Gentiles, even they loved those who loved them. The Gentiles themselves, who were despised by the Jews and despised them, even they greet each other. None of this is in dispute. But all such love is human and flawed. One commentator says, for example "In loving his friends a man may in a certain sense be loving only himself, kind of expanded selfishness" That's so true. John Stott says "The life of unredeemed humanity is based on rough justice, avenging injuries and returning favors. The life of the new redeemed humanity is based on divine love, refusing to take revenge but overcoming evil with good"

The question Jesus asked is: "What more are you doing than others? This simple word "more" is the essence of what he is saying. It is not enough for Christians to resemble non-Christians. Just as our God-gifted righteousness is to exceed the human righteousness of the Pharisees, so our God-gifted and God-emulating love is to be something more than that of the Gentiles. Bonhoeffer, again, says "What makes the Christian different from other men is the the 'more,' the 'beyond-all-that.' It is the love of Jesus Christ himself, who went patiently and obediently to the cross." To love this way is not to love the way men have always loved, but to become by grace a channel of the love of God.

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, no person in East Germany was more despised than former Communist dictator Erich Honecher. The Communist Party rejected him and refused housing. He and his wife were homeless and destitute. Enter pastor Uwe Holmer. Made aware of the Honechers' straits, the pastor and his family decided to take the former dictator into their own home! Honecher's wife, Margot, had ruled East German education for decades. Eight of Pastor Holmer's ten children had been turned down for higher education under her policies, because they were Christians. Now the Holmers were caring for their personal enemy. This was unnatural, Christlike. By the grace of God, the Holmers loved their enemies, did them good, and prayed for them.

So we've seen the summary command, the divine standard we are to strive for and the human standard we are, by grace, to exceed. The zinger to this passage comes in Jesus' final comment, verse 48: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The concept that God's people must imitate God rather than men is not new. The book of Leviticus has the command five times "you shall therefore be holy as I am holy." Yet here Christ's call to us is not just to be "holy" but to be "perfect," or "mature," as it's often translated.

Some teachers have seen in this verse a promise of reaching in this life a state of sinless perfection. But Jesus has already said in the Beatitudes that a hunger and thirst after righteousness is a perpetual characteristic of his disciples, and in the next chapter he will teach us to pray constantly, "Forgive us our sins." Both of these are clear indications that Jesus did not expect his followers to become morally perfect in this life. In context the "perfection" he demands is maturity in loving as God does, love shown even to those who do not return it. The parallel verse in Luke's account confirms this: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." We are called to be perfect in love, that is, to love even our enemies with the merciful, embracing love of God. This is an unapproachable standard, but one toward which we are to continually strive.

Christ's call to us is new not only because it is a command to be 'perfect' rather than 'holy', but also because of his description of the God we are to imitate. In the Old Testament it was always 'I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.' But now in New Testament it is not the unique Redeemer of Israel whom we are to follow and obey; it is our Father who is in heaven, our heavenly Father. It's not just imitation of the one who has rescued us, but imitation of the one who in perfect love has adopted us. And it is imitation that comes from our hearts as the manifestation of our new nature. We are the sons of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, and we demonstrate whose sons we are when we exhibit the family likeness, when we love with an upside-down love like his.

Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute. These sober statements are to be taken just as seriously as not practicing adultery in our hearts, not harboring anger. This means, first, taking the example of Jesus seriously. Ron Block and Rebecca Reynolds wrote a song that captured this, and I added imagery from Christ's suffering to illustrate it "Lord, I lay my armor down, when beasts from brothers rise; When I am named by lack and shame; when stripped and left to die. . . . Lord, I lay my armor down, and ask that you might bless the fist that flies, the tongue that lies, with truth and tenderness." Jesus models suffering in the face of evil; it is both the highest virtue and the path to victory.

How do we take these teachings seriously? Well, the primary application has to be to our hearts. It has to be to my heart, and I believe a great diagnostic is in that phrase from verse 43 “hate your enemy.” The first thing to recognize is that I’m not willing to call hate everything that looks like hate in my heart. But hate is like a duck. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck and walks like a duck, it’s probably a duck, even if it’s only a virtual duck, a virtual hate that lives inside my heart and maybe never gets out. The second thing is that I often treat as enemies those who are really not. I mean there is such a thing as a true enemy. But there are many people out there who I wouldn’t call an enemy, and who are not really enemies but who my heart treats as enemies. Given those two distinctions, both of which are based on the Scriptural truth that the human heart is deceitful, I can create a list of so-called enemies I have known and people or groups I have hated and repent of them specifically.

Let me start with the most personal, what I call the beloved enemy. This is a person you’re close to, family or close friend, and there are moments where your love for that person crosses a line into something more like hatred. Love and hate are not opposites. The opposite of love is indifference, which I’m also guilty of, but the feelings of love and hate are near each other: strong passions focused on an individual. It’s easy to cross the line from sacrificial care to selfish enmity toward a loved one. I’m sad to say that I’ve done this often in forty years of marriage, when my selfishness has put unrealistic demands on my wife’s very real love for me, demands that echo in my head but are never expressed. And I’ve seen marriages where people have flared from true care and concern to unrealistic selfishness in a moment. Without using the words they have targeted their spouse as the beloved and unloved enemy.

Closely related to this is the “you can’t tell me what to do” enemy. You see this most often between parents and children, but sometimes between husband and wife, siblings, bosses and employees, elders and church members, government officials and citizens. This is treating as an enemy the one who has the right to tell you what to do when you don’t want to do it. Your pushback against this demand on your life becomes disdain, disrespect and dishonoring of the person making the demand. Even in cases where the person, say the parent of an adult child, doesn’t fully have the right to tell the other person what to do, the mere fact that they appear to be trying to can arouse hatred in us. We don’t practice a respectful appeal, we don’t respond in a polite tone, we just blow them off and treat them as an enemy we hate rather than someone we love. Again, the secret here is to examine your own heart, especially “what does this behavior or even tone of voice” communicate love or hate. If it communicates anything but love, you’re not being a good son of your Father in heaven.

Third is what I call “cultural” or “social media” enemies. This is a huge category. Let me take a small subset first. I believe there are people who are genuine enemies of the Christian faith and of God’s truth. The key to identifying them is to look for language that attacks an individual, maybe you, as a stand-in for disbelief in God, doubt of God, rebellion against a core doctrine of Scripture, or hurt over perceived (or actual) mistreatment by the church. These are the exact folks Jesus asks us to love and pray for, and this can be truly hard if they are truly antagonistic. I like the story of Larry Taunton, a Christian apologist who became friends with Christopher Hitchens, an outspoken atheist. That led to some opportunity to share good news with Hitchens. It also led to genuine care for each other, especially when Hitchens developed terminal cancer.

But the larger subset on social media is “they” and “them” enemies. Faceless and almost nameless people who hold different positions on a host of issues and who are attacking or mocking positions we’re inclined to hold, or who are being attacked by people we’re more inclined to agree with. In these situations we’re in danger of listening only to those we’re hearing and agreeing with those with agree with. We’re in danger of assuming that “mine are the facts” and that the theory I hold is not a conspiracy theory. But the greater danger is to let all these arguments cause us to forget that there are people beloved by God, made in the image of God on the other end of these electronic windows. Jesus’ command to love your enemies and pray for them, even if they are only enemies in your perception, is incredibly powerful. To look behind the screen and say “there is a person that I want to bless, even if I can’t fully agree with them.” “There is a person I want to pray for – not just that they would change their opinions, but that God would pour out blessings on them meet their personal private individual needs and care for them in their struggles.”

The larger category we’re talking about here is dehumanization. Throughout history a huge part of the violence and war in the world has been achieved when evil people convince others a particular group is less than human: Jews; Japs; Commies; People of Color; Catholic; Protestant. You attach a label to people so that they are no longer individuals made in the image of God, but just nameless, faceless sub-human members of a group. The diagnostic here is the label “they” and “them.” Our present culture is full of labels; Conservative; liberal; BLM; Antifa; right wing extremist; socialist; Christian nationalist; leftist; masker; anti-masker; insurrectionist; election stealer. It goes on and on. You cannot love your enemy if you’ve dehumanized them with labels.

I could go on, but I’m out of time. Let me just close by saying that my prayer today is that by God’s grace we will turn from our enemies and hatreds to be those who love and care and pray as Jesus calls for and modeled.