

The Properly-Functioning Christian Heart – Matt. 5:21-48

My daughter Fay was born with hypoplastic pulmonary stenosis. Basically, her pulmonary heart valve was under-developed and needed to be expanded by a heart catheter procedure. Within the first 24 hours following her birth a nurse heard a heart murmur during a check-up, which prompted an echocardiogram, followed by an x-ray, followed by a transfer to OHSU for a few days in the NICU and the heart procedure. By God's grace, the procedure went beautifully, and Fay has been, for all intents and purposes, a normal healthy child ever since.

However, although Fay appears healthy, we know her heart has a defect, and that defect could worsen at any time. If it worsens without our notice, it could possibly present issues in her appearance and behavior, eventually causing her to become lethargic or even turn blue due to lack of oxygen in her blood. And so, her doctors check her heart on a regular basis to make sure everything is still fine. Because if something is *wrong*, the sooner we know the better.

As I look at the world around us today, and even at Christians, I cannot help thinking we need to check our hearts. God is concerned with our hearts most of all because our words and actions spring from our heart like fruit from a tree. Which is why Jesus' indictment against the Pharisees was that their hearts were far from God.

Such is the natural state of man. We are born with something fatal inside us. Through Jesus it can be fixed, and if you're His, it has been fixed, much like Fay's heart valve. However, we all know that sometimes the in-born problem still causes issues in our lives. So, I believe it wise to check our hearts from time to time, to ensure it is functioning properly. Because the properly functioning Christian heart is capable of something incredible; it is capable of unconditional love for our enemies. We see this in Matthew 5:43-48. This morning I want to look at this passage, and the verses leading up to it, and have us consider whether our hearts are functioning the way our Lord told us they should.

Before we get to the passage, let's recall Jesus' target audience. He starts the Sermon on the Mount saying that the meek and lowly of the earth are invited into the blessing of God. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" captures the basic idea. He then says that such people will be like salt and light by exhibiting a righteousness that surpasses even the righteousness of the supposed religious elite. The Gospel is not that good people can be righteous, but that the spiritually bankrupt can experience the righteousness of Jesus, first as a gift given, and gradually as a life lived.

Such a transformation can only ever be attributed to God; hence, He gets the glory. Only One has ever had the righteousness necessary to enter the kingdom His own merit, and so we must first

enter based on His obedience. *But*, Jesus at the close of his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-27 uses two illustrations to make it clear that people can and should *do* what He teaches. He says that the one who will be justified on the day of judgement is not the miracle worker (necessarily), that's not the determining factor, rather it is the one who "does the will of my Father in heaven". And second, the one whose house withstands the storm is not the one who simply hears what Jesus says, but the one who hears and *does* what Jesus teaches.

And so, Jesus is teaching something remarkable to this mixed crowd of people that likely spanned the social hierarchy of the time. First, that you do not need to have a righteousness of your own to enter the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, not even the righteousness of the most devout is adequate. Because second, all, from the lowest person to the greatest, are offered a righteousness that gains them access to the kingdom and the ability to live according to that kingdom's ways. And the pinnacle of that kingdom way of living is to love one's enemies.

But first, the heart that would be disposed to such divine love must be rid of a number of other sinful attitudes and propensities, which is why Jesus starts with a discussion of anger, lust, divorce, oaths, and retaliation. If those five things have ever struck you as an odd list of morals for Jesus to address in His most famous sermon, then hopefully this morning's consideration will help clarify His choices. To state it clearly, these five topics are prerequisites to loving your enemy.

Jesus starts with anger in verse 21-26. Let us read that. So, the Pharisees' standard, representing the righteousness that falls short of the kingdom, was simply not to murder. Of course, you can still be a pretty horrible person without being a murderer. Therefore, Jesus says the standard is actually to not even be angry, not insult, and not accuse someone of folly. For such feelings, thoughts, and accusations share the DNA of murder, says Jesus.

In contrast, the heart of a disciple of Jesus will care so much for others, be so concerned with anger they will do everything they can to dissipate it in themselves *and* others. Notice the example, the kingdom heart will compel you to do something like leave in the middle of a church service, not only to deal with your own anger, but event to assuage the anger someone has against you. Someone with such a heart understands the destructive force that anger tends to be in the world and seeks to rid not just themselves of it, but to extinguish it wherever it is found.

So, I ask: has your heart been prone to anger, perhaps even presenting in contempt, and frustrated utterances, or has it been overwhelmed with a desire for peace and reconciliation between yourself and your fellow man? If the latter, you are doing what Jesus taught indicating a properly-functioning Christian heart. If the former, you must be rid of such anger if you are to love your enemies.

Let us read verses 27-30. Here we see that the Pharisees' righteousness simply called for abstaining from adultery, but, as with murder, you can have a pretty disturbing sexual ethic without committing adultery. Whereas the heart of a disciple of Jesus will desire to curb lust by any means.

It is, I think, no accident that lust follows anger in Jesus' discourse. Anger and lust represent our basest, instinctual vices. Anger and lust flare up within us, and if we are not proactive in defending against them and cultivating their opposites they can overtake and control us. Lust is nearly synonymous with desire, being an individual desire itself. In fact, the Greek root used here is translated "desire," "longing," and even "covet" elsewhere in the New Testament.

It is important to understand that sexual desire, and desire in general is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. If governed by goodness, desire is a gift that accompanies right relationship to the world around us. If not submitted to goodness, desire will run amok, often, if not always, to very destructive ends. It is this tendency that results in addiction of one kind or another. A tell-tale sign of addiction is disregard for the effect the addiction has on others.

Such overwhelming desire focuses on the object not for its good or the good of another, but for the gratification of the one who feels desirous. It is, in other words, obsessively selfish. Sexual lust captures the disturbing nature of this selfishness, often disregarding such evils as dehumanization, objectification, and outright abuse of others in the pursuit of gratifying lust. Yet, while sexual lust is a particularly vivid example, the desire for power, money, fame, food, alcohol, drugs, video games, social media, or any other addictive substance or activity share this basic selfishness that destroys the social fabric of the world at virtually every level.

Again, the heart of a disciple of Jesus proactively seeks all means of curbing such selfish desire. So much so that thoughts of cutting off offending body parts can seem reasonable. Let me say, I *do* believe Jesus was using exaggeration to make a point here. Please realize that lust, and desire in general is primarily a matter of the mind and the heart, so cutting off a body part or two will not help. But His exaggeration speaks to the severity of the sin. The disciple of Jesus understands the depth of offense inherent to the act of degrading the image of God, or any other good gift from Him, for the self-gratification.

And so, I ask: has your heart been prone to the fulfillment of selfish desires, or has it pursued the good of others even at personal injury, inconvenience, or expense? Before you answer, I feel compelled to mention a particular desire that has been a great temptation to me of late, and that is the desire to be right. Of course, we want to live in line with truth, and in that sense should want to be right. But being right is not the ultimate cause to which Christians are called, and other people are not to be

sacrificed in its interest. So, I ask: have you in your desire to be right disregarded how the gratification of that desire might degrade another image bearer, or have you, in the words of Ephesians 4:29, “let no corrupting talk come out of your [mouth], but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear”? If the latter, you are doing what Jesus taught, indicating a properly-functioning heart. If the former, you need to know that your ability to love your enemies will always be handicapped to the extent you are enslaved to personal gratification.

Jesus moves on from lust to divorce. Let us read verses 31-32. We see here that the Pharisees, not unlike our current culture, held that you simply had to file the proper paperwork for divorce to be justified. This allowed men to end the marriage whenever they felt it no longer suited them. In other words, it is a utilitarian view of relationships. Jesus makes it clear that a piece of paper does not separate that which God has joined. The heart of the disciple of Jesus understands that covenants are made before the Lord, and as such, He alone decides what constitutes grounds for the breaking of that covenant.

It is clear from Jesus’ teaching on lust and divorce that in God’s eyes relationships are not arenas for self-gratification, but for selfless love and steadfast commitment. In other words, other image bearers do not exist for our personal use, they exist to reveal God’s glory and therefore deserve our reverence, respect, and faithfulness.

And so, I ask: are there relationships you have forsaken recently because they have become more trouble than you think they’re worth, or have you honored your commitments and covenants despite increased difficulty? If the latter, you are doing as Jesus taught, indicating a properly-functioning heart. If the former, you will not be able to love your enemies as long as you expect relationships to be self-gratifying.

Jesus now moves on to oaths in verses 33-37. In these verses Jesus explains that the Pharisees believed that you could swear or take an oath, as long as you were sure to fulfill it. Jesus, on the other hand, says that to add anything to your “yes” or “no” comes from evil. This might seem like a strange thing for Jesus to say, until you consider what we are often trying to do when we take an oath.

Do you know why people “swear to God,” or “swear on all that is holy,” or “swear on my mother’s life”? We add such oaths to our claims as a way of enticing people trust us more readily. Which may belie the fact that perhaps we are not trustworthy. After all, if we are simply trustworthy, we have no need for such emotional manipulation. Thus, the disciple of Jesus will simply say “yes” or “no,” because the kingdom heart does not want to gain people’s trust through manipulation, but through a reputation of simple integrity.

So, I ask: have you attempted to manipulate others, or have you simply stated what you believe to be true and supported that belief with your actions? If the latter, you are doing as Jesus taught indicating a properly-functioning heart. If the former, as long as you manipulate others you will not be able to love your enemies. For manipulation has no part in love.

Jesus moves next to retaliation in verses 38-42. So, the Pharisees believed in eye for an eye justice. Asserting that if someone wrongs you, they ought to experience that wrong in kind. Jesus says those with kingdom righteousness will return good for evil. If someone slaps you, a gesture of insult in ancient times, don't return it, but prepare to accept another. If someone sues you, give more than what the settlement requires. If someone forces you to go a mile, go two. This is a reference to an oppressive government dictate that allowed Roman soldiers to commandeer the services of a civilian to carry their gear. Give to the one who begs, and because of the context of unfairness I would add, even if they will use that money improperly in your view. Lend to the prospective borrower, again in the context, even if you think they won't be good for it. In short, as Romans 12:21 says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This is probably the most difficult component of loving your enemy, because it flies in the face of fairness, and we are generally taught that things ought to be fair. Fairness is a good thing, but it is not the ultimate thing Christians are called to pursue.

And so, I ask: have you retaliated insult for insult, injustice for injustice, abuse for abuse? Have you demanded fairness, or have you sought to overcome evil by doing good to those who perhaps deserve it least? If the latter, you are doing as Jesus taught. If the former, you need to know that you will never love your enemies if you are looking for fair treatment.

Jesus now ends chapter 5 with His take on how we ought to relate to our enemies. Let us read verses 43-48. So, the Pharisees believed in the righteousness of hating your enemy. Jesus calls us to love our enemies. It is worth noting that we will have enemies. An enemy being someone who is working against our good. We are to seek their good in return.

As you hopefully see by now, this is the culmination of this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Because to love your enemies you cannot be a slave to your anger and desires but must have control over those impulses. You cannot have a view of relationships in which you end them if they do not suit you but must have a view that includes unconditional commitment. You cannot seek to gain trust by manipulation but must be willing to earn it over the long haul by showing yourself faithful. You cannot have an eye for an eye mentality and love your enemy but must be prepared to return good for evil as many times as necessary. In short, Jesus has shown love to be the fulfillment of the Law in this section.

And the love of our enemies is its highest expression, manifesting the very perfection of our heavenly Father.

This is the kingdom of heaven. It is a place where people love their enemies. So, the big question is: do you want to live as a citizen of that kingdom? Do you want to be a child of the Father in heaven who is good to all, whether friend or foe, deserving or undeserving? If you do, then you must want and seek to love your enemies. As Jesus points out, everyone loves those who love them. The kingdom heart is proven by how you treat your enemies.

So, how is your heart doing? If you are like me, you might feel a bit overwhelmed by how far you fall short of this kind of love, particularly as you consider the presence of anger, desire, selfishness, manipulation, and entitlement within your heart. Yet, I reassert my belief that we are called to *actually* love our enemies, which means controlling those other things within us that undermine that love.

We rightly love to quote Romans 8:28 that "...we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those called according to His purpose." But did you know Paul has a specific good in mind toward which all things are working according to God's purpose? The next verse says, "*For those whom He foreknew He predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.*" In other words, the good that *everything* is working towards is the conformation of those whom God has called into the image of Jesus. As Stan put it last week, God's purpose is that we become little Christ's, making Jesus the firstborn of many brothers.

If pointing this out has only made you feel more overwhelmed, let me give you some relief. 2 Corinthians 3:18 speaks to this same purpose saying, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed *into that same image* from one degree of glory to another." The process of being conformed into the image of Jesus happens one degree at a time. I think this may be part of why the yoke of Jesus is easy, and His burden is light. Part of the beauty of eternal life with God is that it gives Him the time necessary to complete that work, and, let us be honest, most of that work will probably happen after this life.

So, what is the next step? How do we move from one degree of glory to the next? I actually think Jesus gives us the answer in our Matthew passage when He says to pray for those who persecute you. If you have been convicted of something this morning the first step is prayer. First, pray and confess your failure to love properly, and repent. Remembering that we do not repent to a cruel God, but a kind one. It is His kindness that leads us to repentance. Then pray for your enemies. Because it is impossible to sincerely pray for the good of another and not end up loving them. Are you angry at someone? Using someone? Feel mistreated by someone? Pray for them.

It seems to me we often think of prayer simply as a means of making requests to God, which it is in part, but it is far more than that. One of the most important functions of prayer is that it changes us into people who can see, accept, and even desire the answers God wants to give us. Last weekend, my wife Amanda and I took a trip to Clear Lake, and we used the drive out to work through some things as a couple. I shared some things that were on my heart for Amanda, and as I shared, she began to shed a few tears. Once we got to the lake, she told me that she had cried because she had been asking God recently to reveal areas where she needed deep spiritual growth, and she felt like what I shared was a clear answer to that prayer.

Please do not think I share that story to toot my own horn. The times I have missed the mark in our marriage far outnumber the times I have hit it. I share it because it perfectly illustrates how prayer preps us for God's answers. How do you think Amanda might have responded had I started pointing out areas of growth before she had come to a place of wanting and asking the Lord to reveal those things? I do not think we have to guess, I am quite sure we all know how it feels when someone offers criticism before we are ready to hear it, and how rarely we take it well in those moments. For this reason, such a prayer of humility is exceedingly beautiful to God, because it is an invitation for the Father to make us more like Jesus, and He loves to answer such prayers for that is the very thing He has promised to do.

So, do you want to be a kingdom citizen? Do you want to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect? Do you want to be like Jesus? Then pray. Pray and repent to your kind and gracious Father. Then pray away your anger. Pray away your lust and selfish desires. Pray away your lack of commitment. Pray away your manipulative impulses. Pray away your need for fairness. Pray for those who persecute you. Pray until your hate for your enemies turns to love. Pray and watch as the stony selfishness of the world transforms into the soft selfless love that fills the properly-functioning Christian heart.