

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES MATTHEW 5:43-47

I'd like to begin by asking you to do something I'm pretty sure you would rather *not* do. I'd like you to project onto the screen of your mind an adversary—a person who has it in for you or a person who just plain hates you.

I'm not talking about someone you don't particularly like or who doesn't particularly like you. I'm not talking about a person with whom you frequently argue, or a person with whom you don't get along very well. I'm talking about an *enemy*. Someone who can't stand you; someone who is out to get you.

It could be someone to whom you were once close, but for some reason the relationship went south. A former friend, a former partner, a parent, a spouse, or a sibling. Maybe it's a neighbor or a classmate. Whoever it is, bring him/her up on the screen of your mind.

Okay? Now, let me ask you this: What is your relationship like with that person?

You're probably thinking, "Relationship? *What* relationship? I thought you told me to think about somebody who has it in for me? I don't have relationships with those people. I avoid them."

Indeed, it *is* natural and logical to avoid our enemies. Not only are relationships with them unpleasant, they could be dangerous!

However, if you have read the Sermon on the Mount you will have come to the startling and uncomfortable conclusion that what is natural and logical is not necessarily God's will. In fact, it can be just the opposite of God's will. That is certainly the case when it comes to this matter of our relationships with our enemies.

Matthew 5:43-47. 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 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?"* (ESV).

A reminder: Many of those to whom Jesus was speaking had a very serious hearing impairment. They had *heard* a lot of religious instruction that was *considered* "truth," when in actuality it was nothing more than misguided assumptions and cleverly disguised half-truths. Yet what they *heard* had become so ingrained into their beliefs that they didn't have a clue they were believing lies.

In other words, many Jews in Jesus' day were living under a serious delusion in relation to the Law of God. They *prided* themselves on being theologically astute. Jesus declared them to be theological imbeciles. They *thought* they were righteous. Jesus declared them to be morally bankrupt. They sincerely *believed* they were doing God's will. Jesus said they were doing their own will and that it was the opposite of God's will.

That was evident in many ways. Jesus mentions six of them in Matthew 5, but perhaps this final one dealing with relationships with one's enemies was the one that drove the nail in the coffin of their spiritual smugness. He begins by saying in **verse 43**. *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*

"Love your neighbor and hate your enemy" was a frequently quoted statement in the first century. The first half of that statement, *"love your neighbor,"* is a direct quote from

Leviticus (19:18). It was known as the second greatest commandment, and every Jew affirmed its importance. But there was a lot of debate as to its *meaning* and *application*, especially regarding the definition of “neighbor.” In fact, you might recall on one occasion that a religious leader asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor?”

In response to that question Jesus defined “neighbor” when He told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). But that was not the interpretation of the rabbis and theological students of the first century. The school of Shammai, for example, the conservative seminary of the Pharisees, defined “neighbor” as someone who is camped on your side of the street. They took that to mean not only someone who lives in close proximity to you physically, but someone who is, *metaphorically*, camped on your side of the street. Namely, someone who holds your views, shares your convictions, and agrees with your opinions.

That’s what you call an interpretation of convenience. When you come across a command that seems too difficult to obey or apply, or a Scripture that doesn’t align with your theological biases, or a statement that forces you out of your comfort zone, you redefine terms to make them mean what you want them to mean.

Of course, when you do that, everything gets distorted. In this case, the Pharisees’ interpretation of “neighbor” was exactly the opposite of what God intended when He gave the Law. And so instead of being a community that was marked by neighborly love, they became a community that was marked by prejudice, discrimination, and spiritual snobbery. And they justified these attitudes on the basis of their skewed understanding of “neighbor.”

“I’ll love this person because he’s got the same views and values as me, but I can treat that person with contempt because his theology is all messed up.”

But the Pharisees took it a step further. They concluded that when God said, “Love your neighbor”, He meant that your neighbors are the *only* ones you had to love, and that not only were you free to *hate* those who were not your neighbors, you had an obligation to hate them. This is precisely the reason Jesus said, “You have *heard* that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”

The Pharisees had a well-known saying in the first century. “If a Jew sees a Gentile fallen into the sea, let him by no means lift him out”. That’s a pious way of saying, “Let the dude drown”. It’s no wonder the Romans charged the Jews with hatred of the human race!

But this stemmed from the Jews’ distorted understanding of the Scriptures. Nowhere does the Old Testament command us to hate our enemies. On the contrary! Exodus says, “If your enemy is in trouble, help him” (23:4-5), and Solomon gave this command in Proverbs: *“If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink”* (25:21).

Jesus is even more emphatic. He says, **verse 44**. *But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*”

The word “enemies” means “those who express visible hostility”. It refers to those who despise you, those who treat you rudely or harshly; those who would like to see you hurt or fail, or may even like to see you dead.

What’s your natural response toward such people? *One* response is to meet aggression with aggression. “They want to get ugly with me? I’ll get ugly right back.” “They want push me around? I’ll push back...even harder.” We retaliate. We try to get the upper hand.

Or, maybe we’ll just ignore them or shun them. If we see them walking on the same

side of the street we'll quickly cross over to the other. Or we'll change jobs so we don't have to work together. We'll move to another neighborhood or another town. We'll do whatever we have to do so we don't have to encounter that person.

But Jesus says, "*Love your enemies.*"

Love? What does that mean?

Here's what we would like it to mean: "If you happen to run into your enemy at the market, be friendly. If you see her at an activity be cordial, be polite, say 'hello.'"

But if that's what Jesus meant He would have said, "Be *nice* to your enemies." While it's okay to be nice, niceness is not a spiritual virtue, and it certainly isn't the definition of *love*.

Jesus uses the verb *agapao* when He tells us to love our enemies, the most potent and profound word in the New Testament for love.

Please understand that *agapao* is *active* love. It is intentional benevolence. It is a commitment to do what's in a person's best interests. It's being dedicated to serving a person, so that he/she will be "better off" as a result. It's giving a person what he needs so he can succeed—time, attention, resources... In short, it is an all-out commitment to bless a person.

That's why Jesus would say, "*Pray for those who persecute you.*" Prayer is the most loving thing you can do for someone. Do you know why? Because it is the means by which the most 'good' can happen to a person; it is the way a person can be blessed by God Himself, which is the most profitable and profound kind of blessing.

That's love. That's the meaning of *agapao*.

Which raises an obvious question. How can we possibly love our enemies like this? I mean, we can understand loving our spouses or our families or our friends with *agapao* love. But an enemy?

A lot of people have read Jesus' command to love our enemies and dismissed them as absurd. Because it seems *impossible*. This is one of the reasons Immanuel Kant, the renowned existential philosopher, rejected Christ. He read this passage and said, there's no way someone can do that! Human beings do not have this capability.

You know something? He was absolutely right! Ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve in the garden it has been humanly impossible to generate this kind of love toward an enemy. We might be able to muster up a smile, a handshake, a greeting. But *love*? *Agapao* love? No way!

Jesus certainly knew that. And so one of the reasons He said what He said in the Sermon on the Mount was to create a moral crisis in the hearts of His hearers. He said that wishing someone was dead makes one guilty of murder. That makes everyone a murderer. Lusting after a person makes one guilty of adultery. That makes everyone an adulterer. And if there were any doubts as to someone's moral bankruptcy He sealed the deal when He said that if you are humiliated by being slapped on the cheek, instead of retaliating you are to turn the other cheek. That if you lose a lawsuit you are to give the one who sues you more than what the judge requires. And when someone demeans you by demanding that you serve him on the spot, you go the extra mile.

And here He says that you are to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. How in the world is it possible to do all this?

I submit to you that Jesus was not dangling a carrot in front of our faces and mocking our inability to grasp it. Yes, He was revealing that this is humanly impossible, but He was preparing His audience for a new work that God was about to do that would enable His

people to obey the law—every bit of it—in the way God intended it to be obeyed. And He introduces us to that new way in the first part of verse 45. *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵ *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.*

It requires supernatural ability to love our enemies. The only way we will love our enemies is if God's love is in us. And the only way to have God's love within us is if we have been born of God, and have become His sons and daughters. And when He makes us His sons and daughters He gives us His nature so that we are able to love with His love—a love that is unconditional, a love that is unlimited, a love that is unwavering, and, therefore, a love that is able to be expressed even to one's enemies.

The Apostle John said, *“Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone who loves has been born of God”* (1 John 4:7-8). When we are born of God He gives us His nature, part of which is love. Therefore, He gives us the capacity to love with His love. And since God loves His enemies, we also can love our enemies.

That's the rationale that Jesus gives in the second part of **verse 45**. *“For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”* This statement reveals that God is intentionally benevolent to everyone, even the wicked. “He makes His sun rise on the evil...He sends rain on the unjust.” God doesn't bless His enemies with such good gifts as sunshine and rain because they live in close proximity to the righteous. He blesses them because He loves them. In fact, because God is love He loves all people in the world to the same infinite degree, which includes those who are ignorant of Him, indifferent to Him, and rebellious toward Him.

But because God is love He cannot be anything but loving toward these people. Which explains why Paul said that *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom. 5:8). He voluntarily sent His Son into the world to die in our place, to bear our sins in His body, to experience the punishment we deserved, so that we, His enemies, might become His friends. And not just His friends—His sons and daughters.

And all of us who are His sons or daughters have the ability to possess and express that same love—a love that is unconditional and unwavering. Because we now have His nature and there's a family resemblance with our heavenly Father.

Again, that's what Jesus meant when He said in the first part of verse 45, *“that you may be sons...”* It's not by loving our enemies that we become sons, but that by loving our enemies it proves we are sons. It is evidence that He has given us His nature, because we are doing something supernatural.

Augustine, the great Church Father, said, “To love those who love you is human. To hate those who love you is demonic. But to love those who hate you is divine.”

That is precisely what Jesus says in the next two verses. Look at **verses 46-47**. *“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”*

Even tax collectors, the most despised people in Jesus' day, had friends. So did Hitler. So did Osama Bin Laden. Anyone, even pagans, can love those who love them.

What a natural person cannot do, however, is love those who would like to see him dead, or those who want to hurt him, attack him, abuse him, or harass him. But that's exactly what we are commanded to do and what we can do; because that's what God does. And we are sons and daughters of God—we have His nature; we possess His love.

We can love those who betray us and abandon us, because Jesus loved those who betrayed and abandoned Him. We can love those who hurt us, because Jesus loved those who hurt Him, even those who abused Him and beat Him and stripped Him and hung Him spread eagle on a cross. Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Many of you have read Corrie Ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*. For her family's efforts to save Jews during the Nazi regime she and her father and sister were arrested and sent to concentration camps where they endured a hellish existence. Where they experienced such savage and inhumane treatment that her beloved sister Betsie died.

After the war, Miss Ten Boom devoted her life to the gospel, the message of forgiveness, but she didn't know how powerful it really was until one day she was speaking at a church in Germany. She writes:

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly, it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain blanched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein." he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I tried to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When he tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself (The Hiding Place, p. 238).

I've heard Christians say, "I can't possibly love that person! He's hurt me too deeply."

Listen, if you're a child of God don't ever say you can't love your enemy. You can. Because this is not love that you contrive or generate. It doesn't come from the well-spring of your own heart. It comes from His heart. He's the Source. He's the Supplier. Let Him fill you with His love—a love that is unconditional, a love that has no limits—and let Him love through you.

I would be remiss if I did not tell you that the only way you can love your enemies is if you have, first, been born of God. And the way you are born of God is by putting your faith in God's provision for your salvation, which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. And you need to know that part of the reason He is God's provision for your salvation is because He obeyed God's law perfectly when He lived for thirty three years on this earth. Though He was tempted in every way that we are, He never once gave in. That means, among many other things, that He loved His enemies—no exceptions.

And because He is the only human being to have obeyed god's law perfectly He was qualified to be our Substitute when He died on a cross. In other words, God took our sin and wrongdoing and transferred it to His body; He took our guilt and our shame and put it on Him. And then God kindled all His righteous anger for our sins and funneled it upon the body of His Son, so that Jesus bore the wrath of God instead of us. Jesus was punished for us.

And the beauty of Jesus' death on our behalf is that He not only made provision for the guilt of our sin, He also made it possible for us to become sons and daughters of God, who have His nature and His operating system—the Holy Spirit. And that's how we are able to actually obey the law as God intended, including loving our enemies.

Have you been born again? One way to discern the answer to that question is by asking yourself, "How do I feel about my enemies? Do I want them to be blessed? Am I an instrument of blessing for them?"

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES
MATTHEW 5:43-47

MAIN IDEA: SONS (AND DAUGHTERS) OF GOD ARE EXPECTED AND ENABLED TO LOVE THEIR ENEMIES

A SERIOUS HEARING IMPAIRMENT
CLEVERLY DISGUISED HALF-TRUTHS

INTERPRETATIONS OF CONVENIENCE

THE MEANING OF NEIGHBOR (43)

LOVING ONE'S ENEMY (44)
THE MEANING OF ENEMY

THE MEANING OF LOVE

THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF LOVE

A FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

THE BASIS FOR OUR LOVE (45)

A QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT LOVE (46-47)
HUMANLY IMPOSSIBLE

DIVINE ENABLEMENT