



Have you ever heard the story about the man on the subway who seemed lost in his own little world while his children were seemingly going crazy on the train? Someone had had enough and so they angrily reprimanded the father on his negligent parenting. The father looked up at the individual, apologized and then explained that his wife, and the children’s mother, had died that morning. Immediately, the person who confronted him changed. The moral of the story is that, before we make any judgments, we need to admit that we don’t know what people are going through.

This story definitely serves a good purpose for us all. As humans, we ought to be more understanding of others than seeking for others to do things our way. However, this story can also pose a potential problem, too. What if that father was negligent? Do you think that the angry person on the subway car would then be justified in angrily reprimanding this person that they’ve never met before? Probably not.

Let’s get practical. Years ago, I remember a scenario where someone did something either to me or to Tracy, and instead of getting angry, Tracy said, “Well, maybe they had a bad day.” We make this statement to settle ourselves down so that we don’t get angry. But after Tracy said that, I responded with: What if they didn’t have a bad day? What if they’re just rude? I said that not to justify getting angry at the person, but to emphasize that we ought to respond with kindness whether the person had a bad day or they had a great day. We aren’t the judge. God is. And, whether they’re suffering or being mean shouldn’t change how we respond as children of God.

This is a shocking mindset because we, as humans, innately want to respond to people based on their works, actions, attitudes, and words towards us. Yet, in this sermon that we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that we as individual followers of Jesus should not live this way. And, what we’ll discover in today’s sermon is that **Kingdom citizens love the undeserving because God loves the undeserving world**. By way of reminder, the reason why I say “kingdom citizens” is because Jesus is primarily speaking to his followers. And, Jesus declares that those who follow him are part of his Kingdom. Living as a part of Jesus’ Kingdom, with Jesus as King, means we ought to live in certain radically different ways from the world around us.

Now, as we come to the end of chapter 5, we come to what I think could be one of the most dramatic calls to living with love for people around us. Jesus’ words here also reveal a picture of God that many may have neglected or failed to believe – a reality that instead of the Creator God primarily wanting to destroy his enemies, he actually shows kindness and concern for the undeserving. With this in mind, let’s jump into the text. Like in previous weeks, we will review how the scribes and Pharisees twisted the Old Testament and then we’ll move into Jesus’ teaching on what God actually required.

- 1. The scribes and Pharisees justified hatred (v. 43).**

Look at verse 43 with me again: ⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’¹

Jesus is speaking to a Jewish audience, and according to verse 20 of this chapter, Jesus is revealing how God’s commands are superior to the scribes and Pharisee’s interpretation and teaching of the commands. Whether issues related to murder, anger, adultery, lust, or taking oaths, God’s commands are superior. This is seen clearly here. Where in the Old Testament do you hear God command people to love their neighbors and hate their enemies?

We do find part of this command in Leviticus 19:18: **You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.**² Don’t bear a grudge against fellow Israelites. Then we read to love our neighbors as ourselves. By Jesus’ day, scribes and Pharisees did something fatally wrong in their Bible interpretation. It’s something that we do even in this day. We make the text say more than it actually says. The scribes and Pharisees connected “neighbor” with “your own people,” and then said that God only commands us to love our own people. And, “neighbor” thus only referred to fellow Jews. Instead of saying that fellow Jews were neighbors, but so is that Samaritan over there. They limited God’s command. It’s kind of like if were to read a command to love fellow believers, and you might say, “Well, it doesn’t say I have to love the world! So. . . .”

When we understand this translation by the religious leaders, we can understand why they ended up asking Jesus the question, “Who is my neighbor” later on in Jesus’ ministry. Remember how Jesus answers that? Essentially, our neighbor is anyone with whom we come into proximity. I can imagine as the people continued to listen to Jesus’ teaching and even watched Jesus care for an heal so many people – whether Jew or Gentiles – they wondered how Jesus viewed their responsibility to love others. Is that love limited to our religious group, our family unity, our fellow countrymen? Or, is our love to extend to all? Jesus says it extends to all – and he makes that very plain even here.

But you could have an objection to what I’ve said up to this point. It’s not that you object to loving everyone, but you might think that God did command individuals to hate their enemies. After all, what about the wars within Israel where whole people groups were commanded to be killed? What about King David saying in the psalms that he hates God’s enemies with a perfect hatred (Ps. 139:22)? These are the questions I’ve asked. Doesn’t it seem like God calls them to hate their enemies?

Actually, I believe the answer is an emphatic “no.” I have a couple of reasons for this. First, when we look at King David, we must remember that he is the King under God’s theocracy. The nation of Israel is supposed to be a nation that represents God’s Kingdom principles. Anyone who attacks God’s Kingdom in the Old Testament was to be confronted. But this was under God’s demand. And, King David was the anointed King. As King, he could execute judgment within God’s Kingdom. This was not a role for everyone in Israel. Second, when we think about the wars within Israel, under Joshua or the Judges, remember again that the land was God’s promised land to reveal his glory to the nations. You never hear God commanding Israel to war outside of the land. Why? Because Israel was called to be a better Adam. They were called to crush the seed of the serpent and not allow false worship into the land. But even in this, remember that God gave commands for sojourners and aliens coming into the land. God wanted Israel to be a light to the nations. That’s why we can see stories in the Old Testament of

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:43.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Le 19:18.

someone like Elijah ministering to a pagan widow. Or, we can read about Rahab from Jericho being rescued by God. We can find beauty in God rescuing Ruth, the Moabite. God did not call individual Israelites to hate their enemies. He did give the power of the sword to the nation, but in doing so, he doesn't call Israel to hate others.

But, it seems like by the 1st century, the scribes and Pharisees had essentially embraced a Jonah-like mentality. Remember Jonah? God calls him to go to Nineveh to reveal to them that God will punish them. But Jonah doesn't want to go? Why? You'd think Jonah would be very excited to tell Nineveh that God was going to punish them, right? But he isn't. The reason he wasn't excited is because, as Jonah states in chapter 4 of Jonah, he knew that God was "merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster" (Jo 4:1-4). Jonah says, "I knew you'd forgive them and give them your love!" That's why Jonah didn't want to go. Nineveh was a nasty people. They were enemies of the Jews – and of many others. But Jonah wanted to justify hatred of Nineveh. Yet, the story of Jonah is a story of God's extravagant love not only for Jewish people, but for the nations. And, not only for perceived good nations, but for enemies! Somehow the scribes and Pharisees missed this story and they raised up their interpretation above the plethora of evidence in the Old Testament Scriptures that God loves sinners and calls us to the same kind of love.

Now we can move to Jesus' explanation and affirmation that God summons people to love their enemies.

2. Jesus commands perfect love (vv. 44-48).

Read verses 44-48 with me: 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.³

Doesn't this sound like Daniel's example when we went through Daniel 1-6? God commands his people, as exiles, to care for the Babylonians! The Babylonians persecuted them. If anyone was an enemy, it was a Babylonian. Yet, the Israelites were to live among the people and seek the welfare of the society. Now, as Jesus speaks to his followers, he reveals to them that his kingdom is not of this world; so, there's no land to protect. Instead, his kingdom is not of this world and that means that we're exiles wherever we are! Now, we are summoned to love everyone.

The command is clear in verse 44: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. By the way, notice how love and prayer go together. Could it be accurate to say that if you refuse to pray for someone, it might be that you do not love them? I know for me, when my heart is hardened towards people, I struggle to pray for them. I, like Jonah, don't want them to experience God's mercy. But, if I want what's best, then I'd pray. I'd also trust that whatever God does is just and best. To love means that you will end up praying for them.

Also, one caveat on this. To love an enemy doesn't mean that you ignore their sin. Someone could be doing great harm and because you love them, you want to confront their sin. Or, if someone has

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:44–48.

committed crimes, you can both love and report someone. So, please don't hear love as meaning "coddling sin." All this said, keep in mind that the scribes and Pharisees thought that you could take the law into your own hands. But Jesus explains here, and in last week's text, that our individual responsibility is different than government's role. We as individuals are to love our enemies and pray for their eternal welfare.

Why should we love them? Is it because sinners have had a bad day and we ought to be understanding of them because life is hard? No. We ought to love even when sinners just want to sin and work against us. Jesus now gives two reasons for why we ought to love our enemies. Jesus gives his reason in a somewhat fancy way. One reason is found in both verses 45 and 48. The next reason is found sandwiched in between these verses. What I want to do is focus on the inside of the "sandwich" first and then we'll end with the bread. So, why ought followers of Jesus to love their enemies?

First, **we must not turn to the world as our standard (vv. 46-47)**. In verse 45, Jesus emphasizes how God is to be our standard, and then in verses 46-47, he confronts our tendency to justify ourselves with other people. But there's more irony in Jesus' statements here. Let's read verses 46 and 47 again: 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?⁴

Did the Jewish people generally love tax collectors? No. Would they tend to be an enemy? Yes. What about Gentiles? Were they considered enemies? Yes. There was an immense tension between Jews and Gentiles. And so, what Jesus does here is show his followers, fellow Jews, that they're actually imitating the sinful ways of people they think are sinful. So, how are they any different from the world around them? Here the scribes and the Pharisees are trying to emphasize how superior they are by making rules to emphasize their goodness and their religion, but in the end, Jesus says they're not different than the people they put down. They're no different than their enemies!

If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Jesus adds the concept of reward and actually gives credence to the idea that God is a God of rewards. But what kind of eternal reward is there if you just do what tax collectors do? They love the people who love them! And, we can be the same way. Do you only spend time with people who love you? In our day, we've essentially elevated this mentality. We tell people to never be around toxic people. And, listen, there is legitimacy to that for those who have gone through trauma. However, I think many people translate this to mean that if someone drains us, we don't spend time with them. Christians, we must be different. Imagine if Jesus said he would never spend time with people who drained him?! He would have never come to this world, and his entire ministry would never have happened.

In the second illustration Jesus gives, he talks about the Gentiles. They only greet their brothers. This could refer to literal family members or could extend to those who are like them. So, the application for us could extend to us only spending time with our own family unit and we don't let others in. Or, we could also apply this to us if we only spend time with others Christians. Or, we only spend time with people who share the same political beliefs. Or, we only spend time with people who are in the same financial status. The applications can go on-and-on. Do you spend time with people who are different from you? The reality is that we are most comfortable with people like us, but Jesus laid aside comfort. Jesus laid aside glory to come to people unlike him! Jesus, who is the Holy, Holy, Holy God came to this

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:46-47.

unholy world and lived with sinners. Not only did he live with sinners, but he gave God's love to this world. And, even when the world rejected him and took him to the point of the cross, Jesus went. He didn't resist because on the cross, God had decreed for God the Son to take the just consequences for humanity's sinfulness! On the cross, Jesus satisfied the judgment of God in the place of sinners. Why? Was it because we all had bad days and Jesus was just being understanding? No. He did this because doing so mysteriously reveals God's glory! God is glorified in justly forgiving sinners! Have you experienced this love? Have you turned from your sin and trusted Jesus? If not, ask someone about this today. If so, rejoice!

And, if you've experienced this grace of God, then you know you can't let other people be your standard. News anchors, and their attitudes, cannot be our standard for communication to those with whom we disagree. Presidents can't be our standard. Actors and actresses can't be our standard. People in other nations can't be our standard. We can't even look at each other and say, "Well, at least I'm better than so-and-so."

When we live this way, we actually are living in ways to elevate ourselves and to justify ourselves. By the way, to live this way denies the lifestyle of Jesus' disciples. Remember the first beatitude? Jesus' disciples are spiritually bankrupt. Why would we self-justify? Why would we elevate ourselves above others? Apart from God's mercy and grace, aren't we sinners and unjust, too? Yes! So, instead of imitating the world and following in the footsteps of sinful pride, Jesus gives the main reason why we are to love our enemies.

We must turn to God the Father as our standard (vv. 45, 48). Let's read verses 44-45 first: 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.⁵

Verse 45 begins with "so that." This means that we do something with the result that something takes place. What does Jesus continue to say? He says, "You may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Right here, some might say, "Hold on! This sounds like if I love and pray for my enemies, then God will make me his child. Is Jesus saying here that God will forgive you if you work hard enough to love our enemies?" NO! That's not what Jesus is saying. The phrase here actually gives us a wonderful, practical picture of what it means to be a child of God. To be the "son of" something can refer to imitating something or something exercising its power over you. We could say someone was the son of their times. That means they lived out the mindset and ways of that time period.

Jesus is emphasizing to his disciples, who already are a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, that if they love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, they are sons of their Father in heaven. Meaning, they're imitating God! This should be the most motivating statement out of all of the sermon on the mount. Upon knowing that God the Father has graciously pursued us and has made us part of his Kingdom, knowing God is all-powerful, all-glorious, all-knowing, all-present, isn't it amazing that we can imitate him?

As human beings, we're created to imitate, and we often want to imitate those we love or look up to. Think about a superhero you loved as a child. Didn't you ever pretend to be like them? Why? Because they were amazing. If you had wonderful parents or grandparents, maybe you have thought before, "I

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:44-45.

wish I could be like them when I grow up.” We want to imitate. Now, think of God! Nothing comes close to how glorious he is, and he has rescued so many of us here in this room. Now, imitation should be our next steps as followers of Jesus! To love our enemies and to pray for them is to imitate God.

Just in case the listeners wanted to deny this love of God towards enemies, Jesus gives two illustrations. God sends the sun for the evil and the good. And, God sends rain on the just and unjust. God doesn't only give appropriate rain to the farmers who are good. He doesn't take away sunlight to the evil farmers. God shows his kindness to the entire world *every single day* even through the weather. If God works this way with rain and sun, he does this in a myriad of other ways. Thus, we can see that the consistent nature of God is one of showing kindness to enemies.

Ventura, do you hear this? I don't know about you, but I often thought of God almost like the Greek's portrayal of Zeus. God's just waiting for failure and then he'll send a lightning bolt to destroy you! Now, I don't deny that God hates sin and also is the Judge, and he will punish all sinners justly in eternity. But what I just said doesn't negate that God “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ez. 33:11). And, as the apostle Paul writes in Romans 2, “God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.” Look at the profuse kindness of God. Over and over and over again, he extends mercy to the unjust, enemies, and the evil. And, this is our standard.

I must say here that only those who have turned to Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God can actually live this out as God intends. This command cannot be implemented by secular societies and governments. Why? Because without Jesus, we won't love God and we won't want to imitate him and make him known. This is the emphasis of Jesus. Followers of Jesus want to live imitating God the Father. In other words, we want to live to make God's glory known!

Therefore, we make it to verse 48, and hear Jesus say, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁶ The “therefore” is revealing what the only right conclusion must be. If God is our standard, and the world around us isn't, then the only conclusion is that we must be “perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Right here, you might recoil. “Ugh, why does Jesus call us to be perfect? That's not even possible.” I think when we hear “perfect,” we tend to think of a list of do's and don'ts. As long as we do this or don't do that, we're perfect and we can get a pat on the back and a couple of gold stars. We might even get affirmation from others if we prove how perfect we are, right? But that's not perfection. That's the religion of the scribes and Pharisees. There is no way Jesus is commending that view of perfection.

Look at the words here again. Isn't it surprising that the word “perfect” kind of shows up out of nowhere? Why perfect? Because to love is perfect. The summation of all the law is to love God and to love others (whether friend or foe). Now, even in saying this, I need to reinforce the truth that we will not love as we ought to apart from Christ. But, I also want to reiterate that in the earlier verses of this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasizes the fact that he promises to fulfill the Law through those of us who follow him! So, yes, apart from Christ, we cannot love. Apart from Christ, we will not be perfect. But, with Christ, all things are possible! Amen?

For those who are still stuck on the word “perfect,” I want to add one more thought for encouragement. You could be thinking that this means God affirms you *if you're perfect*. So, you test yourselves, look at

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:48.

your behavior, and you think to yourself at the end of the day, “Ok, I’m good. And, God’s good with me.” No! When Jesus commands us to be perfect and to love with this perfect love, he’s calling us to have our focus on God – not us! We are already accepted by God. We are free. We are loved. To move towards perfection is to be more like our Father who is in Heaven.

Oh Ventura, I hope you get the joy of this statement. Someday, we will be in the loving embrace of our God. We will dwell with him for all eternity and we will be perfect. As I ponder this reality, I’m motivated even today to be more like my Abba who loves me and cares for me. And, **In knowing we’ll be like our Father, Jesus says that we have the privilege to extend his love to others. We can put into practice a radical, perfect love to those we might be tempted to think are undeserving. By Jesus' grace and the Father's love towards us, we now get to magnify our Father and pray even for our enemy's eternal welfare.**