

Sermon Title: Love Your Enemies

Speaker: Jim Harris

Scripture Text: Matt. 5:43-48 (Sermon on the Mount #18)

Date: 11-22-20

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Matthew 5:43-48 is the last of six illustrations that Jesus used in which—in all six—He does the same two things. We've already seen it five times. First: He shows the inadequacy of human-effort kind of righteousness, or self-righteousness, or works-righteousness. That is what was proclaimed by the primary religious leaders of His day: the Pharisees. Their brand of righteousness dealt only with external keeping of man-made rules (Matt. 15:9; Col. 2:20-23); it's as if you can become righteous in your heart from the outside in, rather than by the transformation of God from the inside out.

The second thing He shows is very much related to the first: God deals with *the heart*. Think back over the five paragraphs in a row that we've seen here. It *isn't enough* to not murder—you have to deal with hatred that comes from your own heart; and you have to be willing to reconcile differences, not just avoid killing someone. It *isn't enough* to not commit the physical act of adultery—you have to confront lust: evil desire in your heart. It *isn't enough* to avoid divorce—you must actively be committed to your marriage. It *isn't enough* to keep the promises you make by doing big shows of making oaths—just live up to every word that comes out of your mouth: let your "yes" be "yes," and your "no" be "no." It *isn't enough* to want justice to be done *only* if it gets *you* even and treats *you* well—you have to be on the side of mercy and compassion and generosity.

In the passage for today, Jesus uses another example—the sixth of six—in which the Pharisees quoted God's Word; they said what God says, despite their abuse of it that actually resulted in them rationalizing doing *exactly the opposite* of what God commands. This time, the subject is love. Now, I'm pretty proud of myself for this outline. I managed to get either alliteration or a rhyme into every one of these points. Verse 43 is: The Heresy Of The Pharisees. Verses 44 through 47 is: The Look Of Love—and I mean that in every way *other* than the song by that title. Thirdly, Verse 48 is: The Purpose Of The Passage.

Let's start with The Heresy Of The Pharisees. In this case, Jesus's teaching refuted a doubly-twisted pharisaical misapplication of the Law. Matthew 5:43 starts with the same formula: "You have heard that it was said..." That's always how He begins it; and then, the second half of the formula is: "But I say to you..." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" (NASB-1995, and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Now, as I have told you: In this case, what the Pharisees taught was doubly twisted. Perversion Number 1 is the *omission* of two words. You saw "You shall love your neighbor" was in all caps—and remember, in the New American Standard Bible, one of the useful things that they do is to put translations of the Old Testament in all-caps, so you can know that those words come from the Old Testament. But let's go look at the passage from which that originates. It's Leviticus Chapter 19, Verse 18—"You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people"—see previous paragraph in Matthew Chapter 5—"but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." And remember, I pointed out to you in passing: When you see "I am the Lord" in Leviticus, that's like saying, "Hey! Pay attention to who you're listening to here! This is from My heart to yours."

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Do you see what they left out in what they quoted? Just two little words: "as yourself". The standard for deciding how you should treat other people is: Treat them the way that you treat yourself. Now, I know for a fact that you spend *plenty* of time, plenty of money, plenty of energy, to meet your needs. If you're hungry, you feed yourself. You wake up in the morning and you look in the mirror, and you say, "I can't go to church like this!"—you make the necessary repairs. Well, that's the way that love treats other people. It cares for *them* with the same care that you expend on yourself! (cf. Eph. 5:28-29)

Now, Jesus put an application of this in His own words, in the form of what we know as the "Golden Rule"—hang on, it's coming soon in the Sermon on the Mount, but I've read all the way through; let me read it to you: Matthew Chapter 7, Verse 12—"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets." That's the summary of everything that "the Law and the Prophets" says about how to treat other people: Treat them like you would want to be treated. Or, you might even say: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14).

So by omitting two words, the Pharisees completely removed the standard for God's definition of love; and that leads to Perversion Number 2: the addition of four words. Now, in that original version—Leviticus 19:18—God makes a contrast between "love" and "vengeance." The way the Pharisees perverted it: "You shall love your neighbor"—and they added four words—"and hate your enemy." *They* made the contrast between "neighbor" and "enemy." When you delete two words, and then put in four of your own choosing, you've taken the entire commandment and turned it upside down, inside out, and backward! You *completely* miss the point, and you turn it into a rationalization for doing *exactly the opposite* of what God wants you to do! (cf. Matt. 15:3-6)

Now, that may help you understand another portion of Scripture. Remember when the man came to Jesus and said, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" (Mk. 12:28). Now, we know that behind that was some of the teaching of the rabbis that, with *all* these commandments, if you can just figure out what the most important one is, and major on that, then maybe God will cut you some slack on the rest of them. Remember Jesus's answer? He said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (vs. 30). That's the summary of Ten Commandments 1 through 4. "The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (vs. 31). That's the summary of Ten Commandments 5 through 10.

So, when Jesus said, "Here's the first and second greatest commandments," the response *should have been*: "Aha! I get it! Now I understand! 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' (Lk. 18:13)." That should have been the response, but do you remember what the guy said? It's in Luke Chapter 10, Verse 29—"But wishing to justify himself..." Where would you get an idea like that? From the Pharisees, "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (Lk. 18:9). "But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus"—now, you can read these five words normally, if you would like to; but I think you need kind of a British accent, and sort of a professorial intonation, where you say—"And who is my neighbor?" You turn it into a philosophical thing, like, "Oh! Oh, yeah! I remember! 'Neighbor'—a couple of them! I have to be nice to them." That's the idea.

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And do you remember what Jesus said next? He told the story of the Good Samaritan; and the lesson *there* is that when He says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," He's saying, "You need to work on *being* a neighbor to *everyone that you encounter*, instead of trying to figure out which ones are *good enough* to qualify for the lofty office of being "*my neighbor*"! That's the whole point of that.

Well, because of the horrible misinterpretation, and the resulting twisted misapplication of God's Law, a *huge* wall of separation was built between Jews and Gentiles. Jews were to be loved, and Gentiles were to be hated. It was a problem that spilled over into the early church. Remember, one of the most fantastic things about the Gospel is that it brings Jew and Gentile together on *exactly* the same basis (Eph. 3:6)! Jesus said, "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem"—and they're thinking, Oh, yeah!—"and in all Judea"—Yes, Lord!—"and Samaria"—*What?!?!?*—"and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8)—You have to be *kidding* me! Don't You know who *lives* there?!? *Gentiles!*

And God did it! And He opened up the door, and the Gospel made the jump to Samaritans; and the Gospel made the jump to Gentiles (see Is. 49:6). And remember when God *did that* through Peter, and He lowered that sheet with all of the unclean animals which were forbidden to be eaten under the Old Covenant dietary laws that kept Israel distinct; and God said, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" (Acts 10:13). Peter responded: "No, no, and no!" And after God did it three times, he said, "I get the point. I had better not call 'unclean' what You have called 'clean' " (see Acts 10:28). And then God *immediately* took him and introduced him to [those who would become] Gentile converts to Christ, and He let Peter introduce them and be the first influence to make them into disciples.

That was a *huge* thing! And all of that bad attitude, all of that antipathy, is part of the backdrop to this passage. But it went even further than that. Not just the enmity between Jew and Gentile, but in the mindset that Jesus was confronting, the way the scribes and Pharisees thought, there were not only Gentiles that you needed to hate; but to them, there were "good" Israelites—which, by the way, the scribes and the Pharisees understood to be: *the scribes and the Pharisees*, of course—and then there were "bad" Israelites that you should shun and spurn—"bad" Israelites such as *tax collectors*, and the everyday rabble who didn't know all the complexities of all the rules and regulations that the scribes and the Pharisees made up (see Jn. 7:49; Rom. 2:17-20). You know, hatred never starves to death when it feeds on a *system* that keeps pumping energy into it—and that's exactly what was going on there.

Now, since it was into that environment that Jesus came and ministered, it's easy to understand why *He* was viewed with *so much* skepticism—as a matter of fact, with so much *hatred*—because, guess what? He hung out with the sinners, the people who needed Him the most (Matt. 9:11-12).

Pure love—the kind that just runs over the boundaries of race and nationality and politics and age and gender—true love is *thoroughly* intimidating to bigots and elitists, and that's *exactly* who the Pharisees were. So, that's The Heresy Of The Pharisees.

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Now look at The Character Of Real Love: In Verses 44 through 47, Jesus gives the second half of the formula ("But I say to you..."): "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." Remember back to the last of the Beatitudes, where Jesus said, "You're going to be persecuted"? Here's how you're supposed to deal with people like that: Love them, and pray for them.

Now, maybe it had not been stated in Scripture *exactly* in the term "Love your enemies," but what Jesus was teaching here was very clearly God's intended purpose of His Word. For example: Exodus 23:4-6—"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away"—so, there's somebody with whom there is antipathy between you and this person, and you find his animal running loose—"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. You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute." Well, you could summarize that as: "Love your enemies as you love yourself." How would *you* want that guy to treat *your* animal, if *your* animal was loose?

Now understand here: Jesus isn't asking you to do something impossible. He isn't telling you how to *feel*. He's not asking you to feel warm and toasty, fond thoughts toward those who hate you and toward those who persecute you. But He *does* expect you to act with respect and kindness—even toward those who would like to do you in. Your enemy is an image-bearer of God, just as much as you are—and *that's* a big deal. Pray for the salvation of those who oppose you (cf. 1 Thess. 2:14-16 with Rom. 10:1).

Three or four times, when I have brought up what First Timothy 2 says about praying for those in authority over us, and I've said you need to pray for our president—and I've done that under several different presidents—I have actually had Christian people tell me: "I can't pray for that man! *He's too wicked!*" By the way—in different presidents, from different parties.

Oh, really? *Really?* There is someone that *you* deem *not worthy* of hearing the Gospel—not worthy of *saving*? You have a different view of that human being—all human beings—than God does! (see Jn. 3:16; Titus 3:4) "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

You know, one of the best things in the world to do with an enemy is to turn him into a friend. Do you know how you can do that? Speak "truth in love" (Eph. 4:15)—including the Gospel. Now, if they hate Christ, they're going to hate you (Jn. 15:18). They might persecute you. But if God opens their heart (Acts 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:25-26), they might become your friend (Gal. 1:23)!

In the early days of Heritage Bible Church, I had an interesting situation of two men in the church who saw each other from afar, and *both* of them had their half of a conversation with me. One of them said, "Is that so-and-so?" "Yeah, that's him." "Is he a *Christian*? *Really?* Well, I knew him a long time ago..." And then the other one said, "Did I see so-and-so here? Is he a *Christian*?" And I said, "Yeah," and I got to sort of second-hand

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share their testimonies with each other. It turned out that in a former life, one of them had fired the other one from a job, neither one of them being believers; and it wasn't necessarily done with the most kindness and graciousness possible. *But isn't it interesting to see the transformation?* And you know what? They served *together* in the Body of Christ!

You have to understand—remember one of the examples?—*hatred* is the same as *murder* (Matt. 5:22). And remember the Noahic Law, when God instituted Capital Punishment: To murder someone—to take a life—is to strike at "the image of God" (Gen. 9:6). So if you are *hating* someone, you're striking at the image of God, and that's *no small deal!*

What did Jesus do for us? You're familiar with the words in Romans 5, Verses 8 and 10—"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son..." You see, *that's* the example: You love that one as you love yourself. Loving enemies means treating them kindly, *despite* your human feelings to the contrary! That shows what you're made of.

And as a matter of fact, that's what Verse 45 says: "so that"—or, "in order 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." Now, understand here: when He says, "so that you may be sons," He means: "so that you may *prove yourself to be* a child of God," that you may prove yourself—show yourself by your actions—to be who you are on the inside (cf. Rom. 4:11; Heb. 11:4). So, think of it as: "so that you may *prove yourself to be* a son of God—a child of God" (cf. Phil. 2:15). If you have received Christ, you have been saved by grace; you are a child of God already (Gal. 3:26). But, son-like behavior—when you behave character-wise like the Son of God—that *confirms* the fact to others; it demonstrates who you really are (cf. Jas. 2:21-25).

Now, Jesus does *not* mean that by praying for an enemy, or being kind to an enemy, that you *become* a child of God. That's not how you *earn* salvation, because you *can't* earn salvation (Ps. 49:7-9; Gal. 2:21; 3:21). He's telling you that when you act in a Christ-like manner, you're showing that the life of Christ is in you.

And again, God Himself is the pattern; and He states that here: "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (cf. Acts 14:17) God's character does not change, depending on who is around to see what He does; He is good *all the time*. Your character shouldn't change, depending on who is around. True character is rooted in the heart (Ps. 15:2; 24:4). God lets the sun shine on the crops of the unrighteous, just like on crops of the righteous; He lets His rain fall on the crops of all people, regardless, because He is good.

I found this little illustration years ago. I don't know if it *actually* happened or not; I've done *kind of* something like it. Picture a man and his teenage son, walking down the street in a small town where they live, where everybody knows everybody, and everybody knows *about* everybody. They are met momentarily by a woman walking the other

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direction, and she is known by all to be the chief prostitute in town. As they pass, the father nods and he says, "Good morning." The son's face turns red; and as soon as they are out of earshot, the son turns and says, "Dad! Don't you know who that woman is?!? Don't you know *what* she is?!?" And the Dad said, "I'm not too sure about that woman, but I know for certain that I am a gentleman." Now, suppose that in that town, that woman had a crisis. Who might she be most likely to reach out to? Somebody that treated her with hatred, or somebody that was a gentleman?

Being polite, treating with kindness, praying for someone, doing good for someone, protecting their animal that got loose—that doesn't mean that you *condone* the evil behavior of the other person! It shows who *you* are!

If God offers the benefits of what theologians call "common grace" to everybody—the sun rises on the evil and the good; the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous—if that's God, then it is certainly appropriate for His children to show His love, even to enemies (cf. Lk. 6:35).

Bear in mind: there are a couple of different categories of grace. "Grace" means "unmerited favor." There is "special grace"—or, we sometimes call it "efficacious grace"—that is the grace of God which specifically saves *individual people*, as in Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Or, the John 6:44 version of that: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." That's "specific grace," or "special grace," or "efficacious grace."

"Common grace" is: well, it's grace that is "common"—it's common to everyone; it's the basic goodness of God to *all* people (Ps. 145:9), and *that's* the standard by which we should function in relation to people, even the ones who hate us. And since love is an immutable attribute of God, if you're a child of God, you should act like your Dad.

In Matthew 5:46, Jesus gets real specific. And remember: there are Pharisees there; and by now, their temperature has probably risen three degrees. He says: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" Now, tax gatherers were a despised group among the Jews.

Here's the way the system worked: Rome controlled *a lot* of territory—a lot of different peoples. The Jews were one of the peoples that Rome controlled. In each region, a wealthy man, an entrepreneurial business-type, could pay a sum of money to the Roman government for the privilege of getting a sort of franchise to control the taxation over a certain region. They could levy tolls on exports and imports—as goods changed hands, they could tax them; whatever merchandise passed through the region, they could tax it. Those who controlled the region would sublet their rights to the "chief" tax collectors. If you read the King James Version and you run across the word "Publicans," that refers to the chief tax collectors, who were kind of like the highest rung in the multi-level marketing system of being a tax collector, just under the highest guy in the region.

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Now, the "chief" tax collectors—the Publicans—employed the "tax collectors," and *they* were the ones who dealt specifically with the people in the region. The tax collectors would charge whatever the traffic would bear. They had to give a certain amount to the Publicans—who had to give a certain amount to the regional mucky-muck in the tax collecting world—but there were *huge* profits at every level of that, so the tax collectors became very wealthy...and very despised; they kept the difference between what they had to turn in and what they could actually collect.

So tax collectors had the reputation, basically, of being extortionists. And if these tax collectors were *Jews*, they were regarded by the other Jews *not only* as extortionists, but *also* as *traitors*! So, tax collectors were considered like "Exhibit A" for *sinners*! These are the worst of the *worst* of the WORST!

Remember, I've told you that if you asked people, on the day that Jesus gave this sermon, "Point out a righteous person to me," they would have looked for a card-carrying Pharisee, because they declared themselves "righteous" (Lk. 18:9). If you asked them, "Who is the worst *sinner* in the area?" they would have looked through the crowd and said, "Where is the tax collector?" That was their *definition* of a sinner.

And guess who it was who didn't like the idea of Jesus actually caring for tax collectors? Luke 15:1-2—"Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' " *Harrumph!* How *dare* He do that?!? Who does He think He is?!? He acts like these people *actually need a Savior!* (see Matt. 9:12-13) But we don't talk like that, because we don't regard them *worth saving!*

If there was any group the scribes and Pharisees hated as much as tax collectors, the second biggest category would be Gentiles. Instead of seeing their own existence, instead of seeing their message as for the salvation of the world (Is. 49:6), these ingrown, smallminded legalists had developed *hatred* for those who most needed the message of God's goodness and grace. That's why it was so *astounding* when Jesus said, "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And over time, there had arisen a *mutual* hatred between Jew and Gentile. I mean, if a whole group of people *despise* your people, there is going to be some animosity.

So, in Matthew 5:47, Jesus says: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" In other words, He's saying: "Your kind of religion doesn't make you *any better* than the people you hate! It puts you right with them." By being exclusive, they were proving that they were *just like* the despised ones!

Do you remember what it is that Jesus is teaching us? Do you remember what these six illustrations are illustrating? Do you remember His theme-verse of this sermon? Matthew 5:20—"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

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Now that brings us to The Purpose Of This Passage. Verse 48 serves a couple of purposes: It is both the end of this illustration, and it's also the conclusion of the *series* of illustrations that started back at Verse 21. He says: "Therefore"—as I've illustrated and illustrated and illustrated—"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

And you're saying, "Okay! I don't make it!" Yeah...*you don't*—on your own. And if you're looking to find a loophole by doing a Greek word study, it won't help you. "Perfect" is the word in this verse that means: "brought to completion, full grown, or, lacking nothing." Jesus is saying you need something that is *beyond* anything you can do (cf. Prov. 20:9; Jer. 13:23). You *certainly* need something which surpasses the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. We can't be content with just treating kindly those we happen to like, who happen to like us, when it's convenient. You need righteousness that surpasses that.

You need to *be* a child of God by faith (Gal. 3:26). You also need to *show yourself* to be a child of God by your action (Matt. 3:8), by your words (Matt. 12:37). If there is true faith in a person's life, it is going to affect the person's heart to the extent that the behavior is controlled by the character of the Heavenly Father (Jas. 2:18).

And by the way, the concept that Jesus taught here—it wasn't something new; it had just been *buried* under the mountain of the "do's and don'ts" of the scribes and the Pharisees (Mk. 7:8). Remember: Jesus had said He didn't come to *nullify* the Law, He came to "fulfill" it (Matt. 5:17). And what does the Law say? Well, for example, Leviticus 19:2—"Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" You need to act like *Me!* You need to be holy in your practice, as I am in My essence! Can you do that perfectly? No (Ecc. 7:20; Jas. 3:2). But that's what you need to be, and that's what you need to strive for!

Deuteronomy 18:13—"You shall be blameless"—the Hebrew equivalent of the word "perfect"—"before the Lord your God." So, Matthew 5:48—"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Now, does that mean that Jesus was teaching that you must achieve sinless perfection in order to get into His presence? Well, no; you can't—He wasn't saying that at all. If that's the meaning, then He was *unsaying* what He taught in the Beatitudes, and He's contradicting what we're going to see in a few weeks, how He taught His disciples to pray—Matthew 6:12-13, where He said: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

So you can't be absolutely perfect, *but you can* be like your Heavenly Father—you can be adopted into His family (Gal. 4:5), you can have His Spirit within you (2 Cor. 1:22), and you can have the change of desire that comes with that (Ezek. 36:27; Phil. 2:13).

I would suggest to you: That leaves a couple of crucial points for application; and I'll turn it into two questions and their answers.

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Number 1—Why try to become perfect? Well, that's got a pretty simple answer: Because that's what God commands! God told me to do it...Shouldn't I be all about *doing it*? (see 2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 1:10) There is no higher, more rewarding, or more blessed path that you could choose on Earth than to come as close as possible to living the kind of life that will cause people to wonder what makes you tick—that makes people see what Jesus is like.

And even though you can't attain perfection or sinlessness, because like Romans 8 says: you are still groaning while you await the "redemption" of the "body" (vs. 23), we have to ask: What better pursuit can there be than the pursuit of being as good as you can? Why wouldn't you want to do that? (see 1 Tim. 4:7; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; 2 Pet. 3:18)

All your hard work—it can't save you, but it *illustrates* that you *are* saved (Phil. 2:12-13). The Apostle Paul wove this into his own personal testimony; it sums it up quite well. Look how he puts this in Philippians Chapter 3, Verses 12 through 16—"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude..."

Now, wait a second! He said: "I haven't obtained it; I'm not perfect."—and now, he says: "Let all of us who *are* perfect do this." What does he mean? In his *practice* he wasn't perfect yet. Read Romans Chapter 7, and trust me: I'm many miles behind the Apostle Paul in my earthly maturity...so are you; but, *in Christ*, I have been made perfect (Heb. 10:14)—I have been declared righteous (Rom. 8:33-34).

So, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude..." What attitude? The attitude of "pressing on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." "And if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." *In Christ*, I have attained it, because God sees me with Christ's righteousness applied to me (Rom. 3:22; Phil. 3:9). That's me—that's the *perfect* me. The *imperfect* me on Earth is still groaning, waiting for the redemption of "the body of this death" (Rom. 7:24). I'm still growing. I'm still pressing on toward "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

So the second question is very closely related to the first: What's the use, if it's impossible? Well, this is another way of seeing the command: Jesus put the standard *exactly* where it belongs, for dealing with a perfectly holy God. The standard is *perfection* (Ps. 92:15). And by expounding on what the standard is, Jesus took us right back to the point where He began this sermon: We are totally dependent upon the grace of God to save us; we can't do it (Gal. 3:24).

Remember the first words of this sermon, in Matthew Chapter 5, Verse 3—"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And remember, the word translated "poor" there doesn't mean just living from paycheck to paycheck, barely eking it out; it means "*beggarly* poor"—unable to *earn* a paycheck, unable to help yourself,

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*totally* dependent on someone else to help you. And He says: "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And as I told you: in every Beatitude, there's an emphatic pronoun—"theirs *and theirs alone*—no one else gets in." You have to be that kind of a person. That's what demonstrates genuine faith. Romans 6:23 puts it this way: "For the wages of sin is death"—"wages" is what I earn; that's what I deserve—"but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." I can't earn it, but I can receive it as a "free gift."

*That's the Gospel!* In First Corinthians 15:1-4, Paul says: "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain." Well, what gospel, Paul? This one: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." And if you want to slip in a little something from Romans: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8); "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (vs. 10). Back to First Corinthians 15: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and...He was buried, and...He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

You know what? In the world here, you might hear people lift out some Biblical terms like, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and maybe you've heard it turned into this: "Well, that means that *first*, you need to learn to love yourself"—and hence, the whole self-esteem movement, which some modern heretics dared to call the "Self-esteem Reformation." *Everybody* knows how to love themselves! You don't need *any* help learning how to love yourself—you're *totally* in love with yourself! (2 Tim. 3:2a) You need to learn how to get *out of* yourself! (1 Cor. 13:5b)

Our world has twisted it—*just like* the Pharisees twisted it—into justifying selfishness and introversion. The Gospel is all about turning you *outward*, not turning you *inward*. Jesus says, "Take up [your] cross daily and follow Me" (Lk. 9:23). He says: "Serve others!" Fulfillment in Christ comes from reaching out, not turning in! It comes from stretching out to be better and better, not from figuring out how to make yourself feel better about yourself! Now, there *is* an inward part of the Gospel: Jesus comes in; He forgives your sin; He sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within you; He changes you from the inside out (Heb. 13:21); He fills you with His love so that you can love others, according to Romans Chapter 5, Verse 5 (cf. Gal. 5:13).

Realize: That day, when Jesus preached this sermon—and remember, it was a *big day*; I believe He announced it was going to be a big day; He spent *all* of the night before in prayer (Lk. 6:12), and He started the day by naming the Twelve among His disciples "whom He also named as apostles" (vs. 13); and then, there was the Sermon on the Mount; it was a *massive* crowd; it was a big deal; it was a big thing—and He *absolutely dropped a bomb* when He said: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:20). Then, He gave six illustrations of what it means—six examples of surpassing the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

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And understand, my friend: There's only *one way* that can be done. It has to be by somebody other than you, somebody other than me. We have it in these words in Second Corinthians 5:20 and 21—"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin"—Jesus (Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22)—"to be sin on our behalf"—Jesus took our sin upon Himself (Is. 53:5-8; Matt. 20:28)! What do you think was happening when He cried out: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46)? He was bearing our sin, and He was bearing all of "the wrath of God" that we *deserve* for our sin (Rom. 5:9)! "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (cf. Rev. 7:14)

I would join with the Apostle Paul: If you never have, I *beg you*: Turn to God! Turn to Christ! Be reconciled to God! (Rom. 5:1, 11) Jesus took your sins upon Himself and paid the penalty, so that you can be "*perfect* in Christ" (Col. 1:28, NKJV), and spend the rest of your life *joyfully* growing in your mature—and ever *more* mature—reflection of who your Heavenly Father really is!

Let's pray:

*Father, again, thank You for this amazing grace in which we stand. And thank You for doing exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, by bringing us to Yourself; and then, by hearing our prayers, and caring; knowing what we need, even before we ask. And thank You for this standing that we have, therefore, in Jesus Christ. May it be obvious in how we speak and what we do, that we love You—and where there is opportunity, to love an enemy. Father, we know that when someone comes after us with murderous intent, we will protect ourselves, as You've told us to do; we will defend our loved ones. But, in everyday life, Father, help us to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. Have Your way, we pray, in each of our hearts. You know those needs; so meet them, we pray, according to Your will. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*