

Sermons on Matthew

The Law of Love

Matthew 5:43-48

With Study Questions

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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, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father 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 have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48).

Introduction

An Exceeding Righteousness

People often seek to portray Jesus as a great moral teacher—and He certainly was that. But implied in the “Jesus was a great moral teacher” comment is that He was *merely* a great moral teacher—and in that they couldn’t be more mistaken. In the words above we see great moral instruction. But it should not be thought that in Jesus’ moral instructions He takes rank with Gandhi, Confucius the Dali Lama or any other high profile moralist. For when Jesus talks about being righteous He is doing more than providing information and inspiration for a superior moral lifestyle.

The contextual statement for the words above is found earlier in Jesus’ Sermon. Jesus issued warning that must have given His audience great pause.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees*, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Is Jesus, like other great moral teachers, merely seeking to ratchet up of the morality of His hearers? Was Jesus suggesting here that the scribes and the Pharisees provided a bar of righteousness which must scaled by His disciples in order for them to make it to heaven? If so, it leaves many questions. First, how high must the moral bar be raised in order to ensure entrance into God’s kingdom? How much better than the Pharisees must one be?

Another question would be ‘why the Pharisees?’ More than once Jesus assigns the Pharisees to a status of pure moral vacancy—even demonizing them. **“You are of your father the devil”** (John 8:44), Jesus said of the Pharisees. And speaking of their ministerial efforts, the sword of Christ’s mouth cuts to the heart saying **“_Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of _hell as yourselves** (Matthew 23:15).

So when Jesus tells His followers they must have a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees is He saying they need to be better than Satan-worshipers? That’s a pretty low bar. Clearly this is not Jesus’ point. Jesus is not talking about a quantity of righteousness. He is not suggesting His hearers mount an effort of moral tower building—top floor heaven.

A Qualitative Difference

Jesus speaks of a qualitative difference. Man’s heart of stone isn’t somehow kneaded into a softer stone. The heart of stone must be removed and replaced with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). We cannot remove the words of Jesus from the context of the Christian faith. When one rejects Jesus (as did the Pharisees) no amount of good works is acceptable to God. Human righteousness (not human evil by the way) is as a filthy rag before God (Isaiah 64:6).

So how is man’s dilemma remedied? The problem is remedied when one’s behavior proceeds from a faithful heart.

**“But without faith it is impossible to please (God) Him
(Hebrews 11:6—parenthesis mine).**

In order for someone’s works to be acceptable before God, *they* must be acceptable before God. If President Bush were dining and a bottle of wine was sent to his table from Osama Bin Laden, it would likely be rejected. The gift is rejected because the person offering the gift is unacceptable. Because men, by nature, are enemies of God (Romans 8:7) no person, and no person’s deeds, are acceptable before God but through Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:11).

A New Disposition

A major point Jesus seems to be making in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is that when that broken relationship is reconciled by the grace of God—when a person puts their faith in Christ—it brings forth a new disposition in those whom it touches.

For those who have their theological antennas up, I believe the order goes like this: By grace through faith God regenerates the stone-hearted man who now finds that He has faith in Christ (Ezekiel 26:36; Ephesians 2:1-6; Philippians 1:29). By this faith in the person and work of Christ, God justifies, or pardons, the man who now finds Himself in God's good favor (Romans 5:1). Though he still contends with sin, this justified man will now seek to do good both inwardly and outwardly (Romans 6:1-14).

Previous Examples

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount (verses 21-48) Jesus is presenting six examples of the inward and outward dispositions which evidence that a person truly believes in Christ—that he has truly been saved.

Penetrating the very depths of our being, Jesus begins with examples of a sinful thought-life. We should not have malicious, but rather benevolent, thoughts toward others (Matthew 5:21-26). In our thought-life we should also seek to foster sexual purity (Matthew 5:27-30). Even these sins of thought are sufficient to condemn us before the Father.

Jesus then moved from impure thoughts to the impure actions which flow from those thoughts. He taught against a capricious disposition toward divorce (Matthew 5:31, 32) and then the sinfulness of trifling with vows in general (Matthew 5:33-37). In His fifth example Jesus addressed the *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation. We should not interpret God's civil laws as a license for personal revenge.

The Law of Love

Jesus now moves to His final example of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It might be called the law of love.

You have heard that it was said, __' You shall love your neighbor __and hate your enemy (Matthew 5:43)

In the previous examples the religious leaders had merely distorted the word of God in their instruction. Here they have gone one step further. They have taken the liberty of adding to the word of God. **"Hate your enemy,"** As William Hendriksen states, is **"Nowhere in the Old Testament."¹**

How critical is *sola scriptura!* It is not because of some desire to foster unnecessary denominational or sectarian divisions that I say beware of those who assign to themselves the office of modern day apostle or prophet. Distance yourself from those who say God speaks to them as He did to Samuel or Moses or Paul. For nothing is holding them back from going the way of the Pharisee and adding what God has not deemed fit to be in His word.

Contrary to the prevalent teaching during the time of Christ, the Old Testament did not teach hatred of enemies. It should not startle us, when we consider the immutability (unchangeable-ness) of God, that the message of the Old Testament is essentially no different than the message of the New Testament. In the Old Testament we learn,

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord (Leviticus 19:18).

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink (Proverbs 25:21).

Jesus, teaching in a manner consistent with the very word He inspired continues,

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:44),

The Pharisees, no doubt, were very comfortable holding their enemies in willful and distant contempt. The message to the genuine Christian is clear. It is not enough for Christians to avoid seeking personal retaliation. Christians are to love, bless, do good and pray for those who would seemingly be deserving of their despisement.

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Baker Books, 1973), p. 213.

In an interview with Time Magazine, President Bush was asked if He prayed for Saddam Hussein. He said he had not; but was quick to tell the reporter that now that he (the reporter) mentioned it, perhaps he would. Unlike Jonah and his antipathy toward the people of Nineveh, Christians are to love and pray for those who they would least like to spend eternity with in heaven. His sermon continues.

...that you may be sons of your Father 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 (Matthew 5:45).

With the words “that you may be sons of your Father” Jesus speaks of the kind of love which demonstrates who our true Father is. Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown explain,

The meaning is, “that ye may show yourselves to be such (sons of God) by resembling Him” (Parenthesis mine)²

In short, God’s common grace—that His sun shines on all men and His rain waters the crops of all men regardless of how evil or corrupt they may be—becomes the model of how a Christian ought to love others. This kind of love, like rain, is indiscriminate; it lands on everybody. Rain does not avoid ugly and uncharitable fields. Nor should the love, blessings, goodness and prayers of the Christian be aimed merely at those who have somehow endeared themselves to us.

Jesus goes on to explain how obvious this should be to any person willing to give true love a reasoned examination.

**_For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?
Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁻⁴⁷⁻ And if you
greet your __brethren only, what do you do more than others?
Do not even the __tax collectors do so (Matthew 5:46, 47)?**

I don’t expect that God is overly impressed with the fact that I love my wife and children. It’s like falling off a log. They’re all so cute I can hardly help loving them. The point our Savior makes is that the most evil people imaginable love those who are lovely to them. A godly love is the

²Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 5:45). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

kind of love that is extended to those who are grossly unattractive³ and even hostile to you.

A Gracious Love

One of the reasons I think a Calvinistic (that God saves those who in no way would come to Him apart from His irresistible grace) understanding of God's love and grace toward the sinner is so important is that it sets the model of our love for others. The Bible teaches that we were sinners (Romans 5:8), enemies of God and incapable of pleasing God in the least (Romans 8:7). -“**But God, __who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, -even when we were dead in trespasses, __made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) (Ephesians 2:4, 5).**

God did not, as the gospel is often presented, restrict His salvific efforts exclusively to those who were seeking Him. If such were the case no one would be saved, for the Bible teaches in no uncertain terms that “**no one seeks Him” (Romans 3:11).** On the contrary, He

_was found by those who did not seek (Him) Me; (And) I was made manifest to those who did not ask for (Him) Me (Romans 10:20. parenthesis mine).

Since clearly there are people both in the Bible and in our observation who do seek and find God, the only reasonable conclusion we can draw is that men only seek God after having been sought by God. This is why the Apostle Paul taught that he desired to

lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of (him) me (Philippians 3:12).

One of the many lessons we learn in this presentation of God's unconditional love and election is that our love, like God's love, should transcend all human preconditions. God did not wait for us to seek Him in order to extend His love toward us but chose to love us even though we were hostile toward Him. We, in like manner, should not merely extend our love, blessings, prayers and good deeds to those who we feel have merited it by virtue of their performance. If we are not seeking to love

³ I don't mean physically but in their total personality.

those who appear objectionable to us, we are not imitating God's love for us. For God's love for us has no assignable cause save God's own good pleasure.

Jesus finishes this portion of His sermon with the words

Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

It is in the pursuit of this type of love that Christians move toward the perfection or purpose (*teleioi*) that Christ calls His followers to have.

Questions for Study

1. Was Jesus a great moral teacher? Is that all He was? Explain (pages 2-4)?
2. When Jesus talked of a righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees, what did He mean (pages 3, 4)?
3. In order for someone's works to be acceptable before God, what must take place first (page 4)?
4. Review Jesus' examples of a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees (pages 4, 5).
5. Where in the Bible are we told to hate our enemies (page 5)?
6. Why is *sola scriptura* critical (page 5)?
7. Is the message of the Old Testament essentially different than that of the New Testament (pages 5, 6)?
8. What should the Christian disposition be toward their enemies (page 6)?

9. In what respect should a Christian's love resemble God's common grace (pages 6, 7)?
10. As it pertains to our loves for others, why is it so important to understand God's unconditional love and grace for us (pages 7)?