Civility and the Law of Love

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Five years ago when my family and I began the call to serve here at Columbia Presbyterian Church, on one of the weekends that we were visiting, as well as looking for a place to live, I was struck by something that I recognized early on here in this place. It was a bumper sticker that was placed on a lot of cars, and it said: *Choose Civility*. [Slightly sardonic laughter.] I remember mentioning that to you five years ago, and it elicited the same response. But you know, let's be honest. I don't know why people laugh. That's not an indictment. Remember, I was an outsider. We had just moved from metro New York where Choose Civility was not on the top ten list. Oh, trust me, metro New York is not as mean as people make it out to seem. It's actually a very kind and loving place. But you don't make it ahead by choosing civility in your car, at least, you know. But we were struck by it here. And the reason I was struck by it is that, wow, of all the things as a theme to choose for the county it would be something like to be civil to one another. That is a remarkable thing, because bound up in that are a lot of moral choices—that a county government would choose as its theme to encourage its citizens to make a moral choice of treating others in a civil way. It is the world's way of saying to be kind, considerate, courteous.

I was struck by that because I was glad that it was there, but I was also incredibly humbled when I contrasted that to what we read of this morning. Because choosing civility we ought to encourage, with the full recognition that what Christ calls the Church of Jesus Christ to is far deeper, far more difficult—and that is to choose love. And that causes me to tremble, because I recognize what's in my own heart. And this week we are painfully reminded of what resides in the hearts of many in our world and in our country. And it's a time in which I find it God's providence, as we've been going through this series of *God & Governance,* to look at this passage. "Civility and the Law of Love." What is the Christian called to. If you are a Christian, may the Lord encourage and strengthen and draw you deeper into the gospel. If you are not a Christian, this morning, I want you to at least leave here understanding the depths to which Jesus intends for those who are believers to follow him. And we hope and I hope that you experience this love from those who are around you this morning and from this church and from any who call the name of Christ as a Christian.

So hear now God's word. Matthew 5:43-48.

> [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? [48] You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Now, our Lord and our Father, Lord Jesus Christ our Savior and the Holy Spirit, who has been given to your church, we ask that you would help us to see wondrous things in your word. But may the gospel pierce our hearts, because the gospel is the love of Christ. And who this morning, who this morning could declare

that we are worthy of your love, and yet you love us unconditionally. Help us to hear that. Help us to see that. Help us to experience that. But Lord, I ask you, make us a people who hear the call to love and who respond. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This morning we're going to look at this passage which is a part of a much larger passage in the Sermon on the Mount. What we're going to do this morning, as you look at your outline, we're going to look at this passage specifically at what Jesus is really dealing with. And what he's dealing with is **Our Favorite Justifications**. Secondly, he's giving us a **Vision of Love**, and thirdly, there is in this passage the **Nexus of Promise and Hope** for all—not just for the Christian, but for everyone. So: **Our Favorite Justifications, Vision of Love**, and **Nexus of Promise and Hope**.

So as we begin this morning in looking at Our Favorite Justifications, you need to understand that that's exactly what verse 43 was. Jesus was speaking into a particular time, a particular place, that had a street level application of God's word. And here he is speaking to those who are Jewish in faith, who know the Old Testament law. Who not only have the Old Testament law, but had hundreds of years of practice, and along with that practice they also had written applications of the word that were used alongside the teaching of the Old Testament. They also had their written application of those laws, and that served as a law in and of themselves. So what Jesus is dealing with at this last point is the sixth of a group of contrasts where this phrase repeats itself over and over again, where he says, "You have heard it said…" "You have heard it said…" And what he does by going through each of these six, is he's going down to the street level application of where the Old Testament faith of the Jewish community has now been lived out for so long and in such practical ways, that he's dealing with the street level way in which people are living, though they were claiming that they were following the law of God. Now what he's doing is by going through each of these, he's saying *Hey listen, you've heard it said…, s*aying *You've been taught this* and *You've been applying this,* and he applies it in various arenas, you see.

He applies it in regard to understanding what does the law teach in regard to murder. So as an example he says, "You've heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'"[Matthew 5:21, NIV] And so he draws on what they know of the law, and then he takes them deeper. Because they thought in the case of murder, so long as they didn't actually physically take someone's life, that they were not guilty of that law. Jesus says *Uh uh*. Not so. If you hate someone from your heart, you have committed murder. Now he recognizes, as the Bible understands, there is a difference of degree, but it's of the same kind. And so Jesus comes to this final point of which verse 48 is actually summarizing this whole teaching, not just the verses we're looking at this morning. We'll get to that in a moment. But what Jesus is doing is he's looking at these popular justifications, and this was one of them. "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" [Matthew 5:43, ESV]

The problem is we can't find that verse as it is stated in totality in the Old Testament. What we <u>do</u> find in Leviticus 19:18 is "Love your neighbor." That is most certainly there. The question the scholars raise is where, exactly, is he getting this other part—"You've heard it said," you know, "'Love your neighbor but hate your enemy.'" Well, a couple of ways we could look at this. One is this: Does "Hate your enemy"—did that arise. . . When in the practice of these Jews did it arise because it served as an actual contrast to the idea of loving your neighbor. So the opposite must be the case? That's one argument that's been given. Another very likely place is this: Did it arise from what we call the Imprecatory Psalms, where the psalmist calls out God's judgment on his enemies. One of the most famous psalms, Psalm 139 finishes this way—and if you know this psalm

well, you will have likely gotten all the way to this verse, and then you get here and you're like, *Whoa. How did we get there so fast?* Because he was just saying,

> How precious are your thoughts, O God!
> How vast is the sum of them!
> Were I to count them,
> they would outnumber the grains of sand.
> When I awake,
> I am still with you. [Psalm 119:17-18, NIV]

Man, that's powerful. But then in verse 19 he says this:

> If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
> Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
> They speak of you with evil intent;
> your adversaries misuse your name.
> Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord,
> and abhor those who rise up against you?
> I have nothing but hatred for them;
> I count them my enemies." [Psalm 119:19-22 NIV]

So some scholars have asked the question: Is Jesus contradicting, then, the Old Testament, because this is David. Is the idea of hating your enemy arising from psalms just like this? Psalm 109 is another one. Go read Psalm 109. It's full of curses. Except when we recognize what function David was playing in this psalm. David is God's covenant chosen King for his nation. So therefore on earth, David is representing God. And the key point is this: Because he's representing God, he's looking at his enemies from God's perspective. But there's one key aspect. David does not raise the sword in vengeance against those who persecuted him. Oh, he was tempted. So David is not acting out of David's own self-interest. He's using these verses and he's actually asking God to bring about his judgment and his wrath—not saying, *OK, I'll do it.* That's a very key distinction. So it's not likely that what Jesus was referring to in this justification of hating your enemy but loving your neighbor is being drawn from the psalms. Most likely it is this: It is probably a part of a diversity of Jewish teaching over many years of trying to understand their place in the world of God's holiness and righteousness—they, being the special chosen people of God, being surrounded by God's enemies and now being oppressed by a foreign nation, the Roman Empire. And so they were seeking to want to do a right thing, to obey God. But in the application of obeying God they also began to do something very ungodly, and that was to justify their hatred of their enemies.

The truth be told, what Jesus is contradicting in his hearers, but also in all of us who hear Jesus, is he's bringing to light something which is implied, but very human. It is interesting that so often we as human beings are far more animated—are we not—far more animated in talking about those we dislike and are supposed to hate than we are animated by asking the question who ought we to love. How many times have you heard on all the sources of information that we have—and they are myriad—when was the last time you heard two people debate on television who we ought to love. Most of the time it's who we ought to fear or who we ought to be angry at. That's oftentimes what gets our juices flowing. The reason I think that is, is because of something I recognize in myself. I wonder if you recognize it in yourself, and it is this: We elevate the things we love, and we conflate our opinions and elevate our opinions to the place of infallible truth. You've heard me

say this before. And when we conflate our opinions, our perspectives, and our experiences, we elevate them to a place of such prominence in our own hearts and understanding that they come to a place where we hold them almost in the same place as infallible truth, and we create in our hearts those who are for us and those who are against us. And we take it personally. And when we take it personally—those who are against us—we then begin to understand what is the seed of hatred and violence. This is my truth. This is my right. This is my place. This is my country. This is my street. This is my opinion. And when we slowly but subtly—and not often so nakedly, but so subtly in our own hearts begin to craft and care and shine up the idols of our hearts, then very easily we create the enemy and the friend. And when we do, we begin to create those who we are going to love and those who we are going to hate and fear.

Jesus is criticizing his Jewish counterparts and criticizing any who would use their faith as a shield so they can extrapolate from God's Word ways in which they can protect their own pet opinions. *Love my neighbor, but hate my enemy*. *My God told me so*. It can be so subtle. And so Jesus is confronting ways in which we justify our own hatreds, whether voiced or only thought. They are the same. If we say in our hearts, *You are a fool*! we're saying we hate them. We shake the fist of our thoughts and our words, though we may not voice them. We argue back at the television. We argue back at the radio. We argue back in our hearts. We're building, very easily, walls, and [there are] those who are on the inside and those who are very much on the outside.

Jesus is confronting this justification, and he's calling us to a **Vision of Love**. So after he has stated this popularly applied rule, he then confronts it and he says, "But I say. . . I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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." [Matthew 5:44-45, ESV] When Jesus says in verse 44, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," he's telling us and inviting us into something that is very easy for us to sort of dismiss or just think of as abstract and it's this: He's calling us to be united to what he is doing. So his vision of love for us is his very life. What do I mean. What I mean is this: The vision of love begins when we are willing to unite our sufferings with Christ's sufferings. This is not an abstract call—if you will—not an abstract call to understand that Jesus has died for me and he suffered for me. This is being made incredibly personal. It means that when those who persecute us, hate us, call you names—whatever the case may be—if you are a Christian, it is in that moment that you are beginning to experience just a small aspect of what Jesus suffered when he was persecuted by his enemies on a cross, where he would die for the very people who were putting him there. And so when Jesus calls us to love our enemies, even to pray for those who persecute us, let me tell you, he is removing every single ounce of sentimentality that is ever attached to Christian love. This is not sentimental. This is brutal, naked, hard truth. And one I don't like, because it forces me to do something that in my own flesh I can't do. Can you?

What is it like for our Savior, who was innocent of sin, yet who on the cross said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." What would it be like for Christians individually and the church universally to begin praying that over and over and over again. The truth is we can't do it on our own. We must go to the foot of the cross and be there metaphorically, spiritually naked and saying, *I can't do this, but you can do this in me*, *therefore through me*. It means we give up our righteousness, our ability to be good people, righteous people, obedient people, because we can't do this. We have to go there and sit and consider what Jesus—*Jesus*—has done for you and for me. He who was without sin was placed on a cross outside Jerusalem on a hill where dead people were buried.

This past week. . . Some of you know I enjoy photographing architecture. And while I'm not Catholic—I'm very much Protestant Presbyterian—I incredibly admire our Catholic brothers and sisters who have built incredible buildings where worship takes place. One of those is the Catholic Basilica in Baltimore. It's a beautiful, incredibly beautiful, place. You walk in and you're just surrounded by this place that you can't help but worship in. I've gone in twice now. In my first visit a man who was there welcoming visitors said *Have you been to the basement?* I was, like, *Nope*. And he says, *Well, if you go behind the altar*. . . Now as a Protestant I said, *I'm allowed to go behind the altar?* I didn't know if I'm allowed to go back there. And he said, *No, no, no. Go behind the altar you'll find two stairways that will lead you down there. And you need to go and look at the brick edifice that holds up this building*. So I had fifteen minutes my first trip. This last trip I had an hour. Caroline was in a class in Baltimore, so I went. I didn't even. . . I barely paid attention to the sanctuary. I went straight for the basement. And in this basement has been completely restored all the brick infrastructure that upholds this incredible building. And they have these small lights around the entire basement and it's labyrinthine. I mean it's got hallways and arches and everything. It's very low, but it's incredibly. . . It has to be one of the most quiet places I've ever been in. And it's a catacombs, so there are saints who have been buried there. And there is a small chapel right in the heart of this basement. And I was taking photographs and I stopped and I laid my camera aside and I just sat on the front row. And in front of me was a cross. And I remembered, by the architecture of the building, what was above us was the sanctuary, and I was actually underneath the place where the word would be preached. And I asked myself the question: What does it look like for Randy Lovelace—not a minister, not a husband, not a father, but someone who needs grace—what does it look like for me to sit at the foot of the cross and acknowledge how am I called to love. And there exposes justification, idols. And so I found myself there not coming away, *I can do it!* I found myself going, *I can't do this. Lord, will you help me?* because I knew I had to preach this text.

And I don't know what it looks like for you. I don't know where you are. I can only call you to do what I believe the Lord calls us to do: to pray for our enemies. Because when we pray for our enemies something happens. The Spirit begins to work. And when the Spirit begins to work. . . What's interesting when we are praying for enemies—you know what's interesting? We begin to [stop] arguing against our enemies. We stop arguing [for] the ways in which we think <u>we've</u> been victimized. And what begins to happen is there at the foot of the cross we begin to realize our sin that put Christ on the cross. And if Christ has loved us while we were yet his enemies, are we not called to pray for our enemies? How would that change our country? Not Washington, not halls of power, not places of governance, but what would it look like if the Church of Jesus Christ, by God's Spirit—not through fanfare and self-exposure—but if we were to humbly bow the knee and say *<u>This</u> is what you're calling us to? Lord, have mercy*. But have your way with us and help us to pray for those who persecute us individually and corporately. Because he's calling us to a rich and costly love. There is no removing this fact: It will cost us our pride. It will cost us in ways we cannot measure, because we're giving up our own agendas and asking that Christ would have his will. And isn't it interesting that Jesus, prior to the cross said, "Father, take this cup from me." But he said, "Not my will be done, but yours." That's a rich and costly love. What does that look like for you. What does ithat look like for us.

But finally, the **Nexus of Promise and Hope**. Jesus says something interesting in verse 45 and following. He says, after he's called us to pray for those who persecute us, he says, "…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 the unjust." And then he says, "For if you love those who love

you, what reward is it to you?" Here's the first part [of] the Nexus. Let's talk about the promise. Here's the promise: The promise is that in all of this what Jesus is demonstrating about the Father is his unconditional love. That's the promise. Because he says, does he not, "For he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good?" That's talking about God's love and grace. "To rain"—trial falls on the just and the unjust, and goodness and good things happen to the righteous and the unrighteous. That is a demonstration of God's unconditional love.

But there's something more: It's unconditional love with a purpose. Because notice what he says: "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." What does that mean? One scholar says this: In this time and day in which Jesus would have been teaching, if you were a son you would have taken up the trade of your father. A carpenter? You'd be a carpenter. A baker? You'd be a baker. You get the idea. That is, if we are called sons and daughters of God through Christ—and if you are a daughter, you're made a son and all the benefits therein—in Christ there is neither male nor female, so the blessing here is that all of us are alike and we receive the blessing. The idea is this: That God's unconditional love is very much that, but it has a purpose. And that means if we are sons and daughters of the Most High God, the unconditional love of God will make us a people that are able to love and to pray for our enemies. Because if that's what our Father does, we are called into the same trade, you see? If our father is a baker, we'd be a baker. If our Father loves his enemies, so are those who are called his sons and daughters. We, too, are called to love our enemies. And because of his unconditional love he will give us the strength, because his love means to make us holy. That's the goal.

Because the goal is what he says next. He says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now he says this after he's just exposed. . . He's talked about his unconditional love that has a purpose, but he's also just exposed the ways in which we try to hide. And he says, *Listen, if you love just those who love you, you're no different than tax collectors*. Now it's interesting that he picked tax collectors. I'm not sure tax collectors are any more loved today than they were then. (If you work for the I.R.S. we recognize it's not your fault.) But the point is. . . (there's probably somebody here who works for the I.R.S., I'm sure), but the point is this. He's saying tax collectors have a group of people who love them: other tax collectors. But as a general population they were a hated group of people, particularly by the Jews. Because guess what? There were Jews who became tax collectors, so they were seen as traitors to their own nation because they were collecting taxes for the Roman Empire. So he's saying if you only love people who love you, hey, you're the same as the worst people you can think of—yeah, those are the tax collectors. There's another group: those who were pagans, those who simply loved whatever god or whatever pleasure came their way. And he says, "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do this?" The Gentiles are being equated as pagans, and he's saying this to a group of Jews who believe they were following the law. In case you haven't noticed it, Jesus is giving them a kick in the teeth. And if we understand what he's saying here, it is a kick in the teeth. He's calling us to holiness, and he intends to make us holy.

And then he gives this statement: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is not a summary to these immediate verses. It's a summary to what Jesus has just been talking about. And you know what he's saying? He's calling them to a holiness that is different than the holiness they understood. They believed they were holy because they were doing what was right. And now Jesus is just taking them inside and saying, *Guess what, I'm turning it all upside down*. Pray for your enemies. Love your enemies. And look deep within your heart and see what is there, and you will see the unrighteousness. And he says, "You therefore must be perfect." I need to be clear. This is

not a call to legalism. What he's giving us is the hope. The promise is he will make us holy. The hope is we will one day be holy. What he's talking about here is. . . He's not saying "Be perfect," because he knows we cannot be, but he recognizes that one day we will be, in Christ's return, when Christ comes again and he will make all things right. And there will not be any death, there will not be any tears. There will be only the righteousness of God that will not just rid the world of sin; he will undo the world and the brokenness of sin in the new heavens and the new earth. And we will see fully, just as we are fully known. And we will receive resurrected bodies of beauty and glory. And we will reflect the beauty and glory of Christ our King. But this begins now, not just when he returns. This whole call that Jesus is giving is that this call to holiness begins now, aided by his grace, with his presence, with the promise of his unconditional love and the hope of his return when all things will be made perfect.

The call to civility is good, but the law and call to love will undo us. It will unmake us. But in the love of Christ from the cross it will make us a new people. Let us begin. So what am I asking you to do? I'm asking you, first, do you know the unconditional love of Christ who loves you regardless of who you are, your skin color, your background, your sin. He loves you unconditionally in the area that you believe you can't even love yourself. And you don't want anyone else to see it. I said it to this congregation last Sunday night; I will say it to this congregation in the morning. I want to say this as clearly as I can. That the love of God from the cross is to you: 'I see you for all that you are. I love you and I want to be with you.' Do you know this love? If you do not, may this day be the day that you begin to know this love. Talk to someone. Come and talk to me. I would love to pray with you and tell you more about this unconditional love.

But secondly, if you are a professing Christian, let us remove all sentimentality that is often attached to the love of Christ, the abstractness of the suffering of Christ, and bring it down to the street level of where we live. Who are enemies that you need to be praying for? Who are those that you find so easy to react against and to hate and wish something would happen to them? Who is it? You can't love them, you can't pray for them if you don't come back to the cross again and know it's only at the cross that we see how Christ has loved us while we were yet his enemies and has prayed for us. So only by his grace can we do this thing. I know this series is about *God & Governance*. But do you know our government cannot rid our country of violence and hatred and division? Our government is us. They are not outside of us. The laws we make, the policies we have, it's not outside of us. It's us. And if you desire for there to be healing, if you desire for there to be beauty, love, and reconciliation, it doesn't begin on the television, it doesn't begin on the Twitter feed, it doesn't begin in the newspaper, it doesn't begin in Washington or in Annapolis or Ellicott City. It begins in our own houses in our own neighborhoods in our own hearts. May the Lord call us and enable us to love one another and to pray [for]and love our enemies.

Let's pray. Lord, what you call us to here is difficult. But we need you, because we recognize we are recipients of this very same love. Now will you help us by your Holy Spirit and by your grace to love the enemy, to love the other, to love those we don't understand, to love those who are not like us, to love those who persecute us. Lord, we cannot do this, but you can do it through us, and by doing so you make us holy. May this bring about change that glorifies you. May this bring about the flourishing of our neighborhoods and of our city, of our county, of our state, of our nation, of our world. May the Church of Jesus Christ be found at the foot of the cross a changed people who are loved and who then move out in love. In Jesus name' we pray. Amen.