

Matthew 5:43-48: Perfect Love

We are coming to the end of this section in the Sermon on the Mount and there is a definite shift in focus beginning in chapter 6. In chapter 5 we've seen how the followers of Jesus are blessed: that's what beatitudes mean: super-blessing. We are blessed when we are poor in spirit, meek, peacemakers, so on. The life of following Jesus was never meant to be a drudge, it is a life of future blessing.

Then we are to be a light and salt to the world. Jesus doesn't want closet followers. He doesn't want people who just worship him in their hearts and homes. He wants people who shine their light so people will see their good deeds and give glory to God in heaven

Then the question was: how does Jesus line up with the OT Law? Is Jesus here to nullify the Law? The answer, of course, was no. He didn't come to abolish the Law but what? Fulfill the Law. Not only did he follow the Law perfectly in our place, but he also calls his followers to walk in the true meaning of the Law. That's what we've seen in the most recent section.

Jesus is calling his disciples live out the heart of the Law, not just the letter of the Law.

And we've seen a lot of what not to do. Don't lust, don't take worthless oaths, don't divorce, don't retaliate. And there were some positive commands in there. "Let your yes be yes and your no be no. But for the most part what we've seen has been a clarification on what not to do.

But that's not all of what Christianity is about. Following Jesus is not just following a list of "do not dos." That's what some people think. Don't drink or chew or go with girls who do. Don't watch this, don't say that. Don't go there. Don't enjoy these things.

If that's the sum total of Christianity then it's pretty pathetic. And it's certainly not Jesus's understanding of what it is to follow him. Following him is a life of blessing, a life of over-the-top joy. In chapter 6 we'll see that it's a life of rewards from God. Jesus promises us not just heaven, but **rewards in** heaven. But here Jesus ends this section not with don'ts and what not to dos. He ends by summarizing what the Christian does. And the life of following Jesus is a life of love.

This shouldn't surprise us at all. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was in **Matt. 22:34-40**: He said love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

And that God would say our highest calling is to love him and love others shouldn't surprise us because God is what? Love. He's holy and sovereign and creator. But he is love.

So if you had someone ask you what Christianity is all about, a safe answer is Jesus's answer: Loving God and loving my neighbor. Now that will probably lead to other questions like who is God, what does it mean to love him, what does it mean to love my neighbor, what it love? But when boil down every command, every aspect of theology, every time we gather together we are seeking to love God and love neighbor.

That's what Jesus gets at here.

So what I want to do this morning is have a little bit of fun and flip Jesus's teaching on its head a little bit. He's calling us to a higher love. A love that reflects God's love. But what we're used is ordinary love: So what does ordinary love look like and I think it will become obvious what Jesus is calling us to in contrast.

1) Ordinary love is a legitimate type of love.

We're going to read through this section where Jesus compares ordinary love with Kingdom love and I think we need to just be reminded that you don't have to be a Christian to love people. That the ordinary love Jesus is talking about is a type of love.

I've heard Christians say that unbelievers really don't know how to love because they don't know Jesus. All of their acts of love are really not love at all but are ultimately selfish and self-seeking because they don't have the Spirit of God in them. I don't believe that.

The Syrophenician woman loved her demon-possessed daughter and begged Jesus to heal her. The Centurion loved his servant and begged Jesus to heal him. Unbelievers can be patient and kind and keep no record of wrongs - those are all expressions of love.

God in his common grace has given people the capacity to love. I think the unbelieving mother really does love her child. The unbelieving husband who sacrifices and gives good things to his wife really does love her.

In God's common grace to humanity, we do have some capacity to love. I was listening to a story not long ago about Edda Goering who died in late 2018. Edda Goering was the daughter of Hermann Goering, who happened to be the head of the Luftwaffe in Nazi Germany. He was the head of the German Air Force. He was Hitler's right hand man and good friend. In fact, Hitler and Hermann Goering were such good friends that Hitler became Edda's godfather.

Well, you can imagine that Hitler showered little Edda with gifts from the time she was born. And because of her father's position in Hitler's regime she lived a life of comfort and luxury as a princess until she was 8 when Germany conceded the war. She never knew about the atrocities her father and Hitler were involved in until later in her life. She was shielded from all the atrocities of Nazi Germany.

And Hitler and her father both committed suicide when she was a young girl but she held on to the gifts for many years. Well, it turns out those gifts were mostly looted from the European countries that Hitler had conquered. But Edda was so convinced of Hitler's love for her and her father's love for her that even when she was presented undeniable evidence of who her father was and who Hitler was, she refused to believe that they would do such things. She said, "I love [my father] very much. And it was obvious how much he loved me...my only memories of him are such loving ones, I cannot see him any other way" (<https://albertmohler.com/2019/03/18/briefing-3-18-19/>). She felt the same way with Hitler.

Isn't that interesting? The one man in all of history we associate with hate and death - the one person's name who causes instant revulsion - was the one man she associated with pure love and kindness. And I'm not trying to make Hitler a nicer guy in away, but as wicked and twisted as those men were, I think there was a sense in which they truly loved this girl. They showed it weird, sinful ways, but in God's common grace even the most heinous person we can think of is not pure evil. There is a capacity for love.

So all that to say, we're not comparing fake love to true love. We're contrasting ordinary love with Kingdom love. Ordinary, legitimate love that unbelievers can have without the Holy Spirit. So it is a legitimate type of love.

2) Ordinary Love Hates People. Read 43

This is ordinary love. It's love that Jesus is going to contrast in just a minute. But if we just stand back, I think that's pretty striking. Ordinary, worldly love sees no contradiction between loving one moment and hating the next. Or loving one person while at the exact same time hating others.

That's what makes the situation with Hitler and his goddaughter so revolting, isn't it? Here's a guy murdering millions of people in hatred and taking their things and giving to his goddaughter as an act of love. We're revolted by that idea, but this ordinary love.

This was the love that the Jewish leaders were pawing off as biblical in Jesus's day. What we need to realize with this statement "you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy" is that only half of it is from the Bible. Love your neighbor is biblical.

Lev. 19:17-19: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. 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.

There are several other places in the OT where loving our neighbor is stated explicitly. So this is a biblical command. And according to Leviticus, it's rooted in God himself. "Love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord." Do this because it is in line with my character.

Now what does it mean to love your *neighbor*? In the OT, your neighbor wasn't just the guy next door to you and across the street. Your neighbor was the community of Israel. It was the Jewish people. "Love your countrymen is what they heard. Love Israelites."

Look over at **Luke 10** for a minute. This is a parable most of us are familiar with - the Good Samaritan. And the issue is the same: what's the greatest command: love God and love neighbor. Next question: **Read 29-37**

Jesus's point is that everyone is our neighbor. Everyone we come in contact with is our neighbor.

Jesus flips the whole thing on its head. priests and Levities were respectable - you'd expect them to help. Samaritans were despised by the Jews. In modern parlance this would be like a pastor walking past the guy, a homeschooling family walking by. And then comes along a transgender person with a Bernie Sanders T-Shirt on who stops and gives the guy this generous help. Who proved to be the neighbor? This would be a slap in the face to Jesus's audience.

The issue isn't "Who is my neighbor?" so I can cross people off the list. In Jewish thinking the Samaritan was not a neighbor - they were not technically Jewish. Jesus says the issue is: Are we neighborly? Are we going out of our way to love people? To care for them? To sacrifice for them? This was lavish giving on the part of the Samaritan. The Samaritan was loving the Jewish man like he would want to be loved in that same situation.

So Jesus says your neighbors are everywhere. Look back at **Matt. 5** for the second half of **Vs. 43. Read**

So if our neighbor is everywhere, why did God command his people to hate their enemies? Well, it turns out, he didn't. The second part of what Jesus quotes isn't actually biblical at all. There are places in the OT where people hate their enemies. Even king David says he hates his enemies with a perfect hatred. But that's not a command. And just because David says he does it doesn't make it right. I think it's safe to say there were quite a few things David did that we would never do.

But one thing we know: there's no command in the OT that says we are to hate our enemy. So the question becomes: where did this come from? The answer is: we're not sure.

Most people think this was a logical conclusion from the passage. If we are commanded to love our neighbor, then logically it seems to make sense that we are free to hate our enemy. So this was a license to hate those who hate us.

But again, there's nothing divine about this command at all. You don't need a Bible verse to live that mantra out. You don't need the Holy Spirit to enable you to hate your enemy. In fact, nobody has to teach others to hate their enemies.

When 2 little kids both want the same toy, no one ever has to sit down and say "Now, little Johnny, I want to teach you an important lesson here: Billy is your enemy and you shouldn't love Billy. You should hate Billy and go get him back." You think anyone's ever had to have that conversation with their kids? Of course not. Why? Because we naturally hate our enemies. That's just what we do.

But Jesus says: this is what you've heard. This is what's being taught by the religious leaders. The very leaders who say they represent God are calling for people to hatred.

And this is nothing new. If the heart of the gospel is love - for God so loved the world - then you can be sure that love will be twisted.

In our day, we have religious leaders defending all kinds of depravity in the name of love. Whether it's defending the LGBT agenda because "love is love." Or defending abusive people in the church in the name of

love. Or if you don't jump on board the social justice train you're hating your neighbor. It's turning the true love of God on its head.

We have to define love as God defines love and define hate as God defines hate: according to the Word. No matter what other people might say.

3) Ordinary love refuses to pray for its enemies. Read 44-45

So if you want to love in the most ordinary way, the way that requires no help from the Spirit at all, no motivation from the gospel here's what you do: think of the person that you can't stand. That person who makes fun of you, the person who makes your life miserable, who mocks your Christian faith, who annoys the daylight out of you, who you dread, who persecutes you - and just don't pray for them.

You can literally do nothing at all and love them as much as the world loves. This is Jonah-level love.

You remember Jonah? God told him to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians were hated by the Jews because they were so brutal and disgusting and oppressive. And God said go to Nineveh and cry out against it. Preach to them that they need to repent otherwise God will destroy them. But he hates the Ninivites so much that at the mere possibility that they might repent and be saved he runs the other direction, gets on a boat going as far away from Nineveh as possible. He gets tossed into the sea and almost drowns when God sends a fish to swallow him, and vomits him up on the shore back in Israel. God says again: Go to Nineveh and call out the message against the city. So what does he say? "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" and then went outside the city to see God destroy it. The end. He did the absolute bare minimum to pray for and save his enemies. And God saved them anyway.

Jonah's love was ordinary love. Nothing special about it at all. Jonah loved a little plant that God gave him for shade more than he loved the Ninevites.

And if we're honest this is really often our level of love, too. We don't pray for those we hate. We don't pray for those who persecute us or irritate us. Or we throw up a little something every once in a great while. But more or less we're like Jonah. We'd be just as happy to be sitting on a hill overlooking their house when Jesus returns in flaming fire and vengeance. We'd have a tailgate party and livestream the destruction of our enemies. That's ordinary love.

When Jesus comes along and says: oh no. That's not what I'm calling you to. What did Jesus pray to the Father when he was hanging on the cross for the soldiers sitting below him? Father what? Forgive them for they know not what they are doing.

What do you mean they don't know what they're doing? They're Roman soldiers, they've probably crucified hundreds of people. They're so hardened that they make fun of the guy who is dying above them in utter agony. "Oh, you're Christ. Come down then and we'll believe." We think our culture is desensitized to violence. These guys are rolling dice for Jesus's clothes under the cross as he's screaming in pain and gasping for breath. And when he does catch his breath he prays for them - and they can hear it.

"Don't count this against them Father. Forgive their sins." He's praying to God that he would forgive the sins of the guys who are murdering him. You remember what happens the moment Jesus died and the veil is torn and there's an earthquake? They believe! Wonder of wonders: God answers the prayer!

You remember Stephen, the very first martyr in the books of Acts? What did he pray as the people were throwing stones at him to kill him? The exact same thing. And standing there overseeing the whole thing was Saul who later became who? The apostle Paul. That's interesting: part of the reason Paul is who he is is because God answered Stephen's prayer.

We have no idea how God is going to answer our prayers for those who persecute us and hate us. Those prayers might not be answered until well after we're dead. It might take us dying for them to be answered.

In God's economy, the Kingdom advances not through violence but through conversion. And usually it's the conversion of former persecutors and haters and atheists and agnostics and people who hated God. But who saw his love reflected in the very people they persecuted.

Christ died to save his enemies from damnation; there may come a day where we do the same. And our death and our prayers will be the means by which they worship the Christ who died for them.

4) Ordinary love ignores the pattern of the Father. Read 44-45

Most kids want to be like their fathers. They want to do what their fathers do, they want to imitate them in some way. Jesus said we pray for our enemies so that we are like our Father who is in heaven. Children do what their parents do. And children of God want to be like God. Well, what does God do?

He provides the most essential things for all people whether they love him or not. He provides them whether they even acknowledge him or not.

You know the question people often ask to try to refute that there is a God: Why do bad things happen to good people? You know why that question is flawed? Because there are no good people. The entire human race is conceived in sin and born for destruction. We are all dead in our sins, enemies of God, children of wrath. Romans says no one seeks for God, we don't do good, our feet are swift to shed blood. We are wretches, as Amazing Grace so aptly says.

The question is not: why do bad things happen to good people. The question is why does anything good at all happen to anyone in the human race seeing as we're all sinners. Jesus says: you know what the answer is? God's love. His common grace toward all humanity.

God gives sunshine to the atheist Richard Dawkins, a guy who makes it his life's work to try to disprove the God who gives him sunshine. God gives rain to all the Buddhists in Japan to grow crops and drink safely even though they reject him. The Muslims who are persecuting Christians right now across the middle east - sunshine and rain.

You realize that God could just rain down fire and sulfur like Sodom and Gomorrah and wipe everyone out who opposes him, right? Like Korah's rebellion, he could make the ground open up and swallow every person spreading a false gospel. He could send in the Angel of the Lord like during the plagues on Egypt to kill just his enemies and leave his people.

He has every right to do that. Every reason to do that. If we're really honest with ourselves, he should really do that to us too because we're just as sinful. But he doesn't. Why not? Because God loves his enemies. His love is so amazing and so abundant that it literally overflows in blessing to the people who hate him.

Will there come a day of reckoning and judgment? Of course, and on that day there will be no more sunshine and rain. There will be outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. And they, like the rich man, will beg of God for one single drop of water to cool their tongue as they burn in fire.

But in the mean time, God gives them warmth and light and water and money and wealth and enjoyment and children and vacations and success because God loves even his enemies. This is who our Father is.

Our Father knows the end - he knows what's coming to them. His enemies don't threaten him. His enemies don't intimidate him.

Because he knows the end. As it's been said, for those who refuse God all their life, this life on earth is the closest thing to heaven they will ever experience. For those of us who are his children, this life is the closest thing to hell we'll ever experience. And so, like our Father, we can have compassion on people who will never know any higher joy than this sin-stained earth.

And so we can follow the pattern of our Father who loves even his enemies. We can pray that God would not just pour out common grace on our enemies, but that he would pour out saving grace on our enemies.

5) Ordinary love only looks to this life. Read 46-47

Ordinary love is tax-collector love. I don't know what you think of the IRS but love is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. Well, the Jews hated tax-collectors more than most people hate the IRS.

And Gentiles were pagans idolators. Just think of the most savage, remote island tribe you can think of where people sacrifice children and summon demons: that's how the Jews viewed Gentiles. The Roman and pagan savages who were utterly godless and idolatrous.

Yet even they had some love. But it's a very earthly love. It's a love that's completely focused on this life. Enjoying the here and now. Making pleasure for themselves in the here and now.

Jesus, for the first time mentions rewards in **Vs. 46. Read**

This is going to be a huge aspect of the coming section of the Sermon: the life of following Jesus is motivated by rewards. Heavenly rewards. Eternal rewards. Not just heaven, but rewards in heaven.

And the idea is that ordinary love just does what is best for this life. So tax collectors are just grabbing a little treasure in the here and now; sorry everyone else. Gentiles who had no hope of the Kingdom to come were just living for the moment.

But heavenly love - the love Jesus is calling us to - looks to what will bring the biggest eternal reward. We put away some money every month in our Roth IRA for future reward. Jesus says you should put some away for an eternal reward. You know one way you fill that account up? Love your enemies. Tangibly and radically.

6) Ordinary love is not complete. Read 48

This is probably the weirdest verse in this section because it doesn't seem to fit. We hear "be perfect" and what comes to mind is sinless perfection. We can't mess up at all. Jesus is calling us to the highest possible standard.

And that is true to some extent. As followers of Jesus we are called to repentance and obedience. We are called to consider our old sinful selves dead and live as though we are alive to Christ. No Christian has to sin. There is a sense in which if we truly were submissive to the Spirit we could walk a perfect life.

But we don't, do we? We like Paul, can say we are the chief of sinners. So what's Jesus getting at here? I don't think he's calling us to sinless perfection. The word "perfect" is the Gk word τέλειός and it can mean perfect or complete or whole. I don't think Jesus is calling us to perfection right here - that doesn't fit. I think he's calling us to wholeness.

See ordinary love is just a show. It loves on the outside and may occasionally love on the inside. But what God wants is his people to love like him. To love all people in a radical way. Not just loving those who love us back, but loving those who even hate us. And love those people from our heart. That's the wholeness or completeness that Jesus is calling us to.

This is a hard love. But it's a love we should know well as God's children. Children who were God's enemies, who were worthless and rebellious and who God in his mercy gave up his own Son to save. May God give us the grace to love in the same way.

Pray