

I'm Supposed to Love Whom?

Matthew 5:43-48

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What if some of what you have heard about God isn't true? What if some of the ways you are living, which you thought were based on God's teachings, are not what God wants you to be doing?

That was the case for the people Jesus was teaching on the hillside in Galilee.

Some of the things they had heard about God was challenged by Jesus.

Now the people in his home town of Nazareth had chased him out of the Synagogue for challenging some of the things believed about God, mainly that God hated anyone that wasn't Jewish.

They almost killed Jesus for preaching that God loved someone other than them.

Undeterred, Jesus boldly challenged these people: "You've heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"

Well, let's stop right there.

Jesus was telling them that there was a problem with what they had heard.

Remember, they didn't have access to the scrolls. They could only hear them read in the synagogues and the temple.

The priest could instruct them after they heard the scriptures read, but they didn't have access to the scrolls themselves, a problem that persisted for about 1500 more years.

Unless the Holy Spirit revealed something to the people, or a prophet spoke on behalf of God, this was the extent of how the word of God came to them.

You have heard that the law says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

Well, which biblical law said that?

I challenge you to find it for me.

If you have an NIV Bible, it notes the reference to the first part of that verse as Leviticus 19:18. This is the verse that taught the Hebrews to love their neighbor as themselves.

However, if you will look carefully, you will notice that there is no scripture reference for the second half of the verse: hate your enemies, because nowhere in the Hebrew Bible were the Jews commanded to hate their enemies.

In case you haven't noticed, hate isn't something you have to command or teach. It seems to bubble up without too much care or effort. Unattended, it will just grow like kudzu. In fact, you have to tend your soul to keep it hate growing. Hate is the weeds of the soul. We have to keep pulling them out.

Oh, sure. There are plenty of places in the Bible where we read that the Israelites fought their enemies. They opposed them, and defended their people, but nowhere does God command them to hate.

To the contrary, there are many places in the Old Testament where the Hebrews are commanded to welcome the stranger, and to live peaceably among those who carried them away into exile. We also see examples of prophets extending love to Gentiles.

The people were never given a license to hate but after a while it became learned and acceptable behavior, even to the point of rising to the law of the land. It was what you were supposed to do.

We can do things one way for so long that we assume that it is God's way. We can even think something for so long that we think it must be printed in the Bible.

"Everything happens for a reason." It's not holy scripture but we've said it so much we think it is. There isn't always an apparent reason why things happen. Sometimes, stuff just happens. Sometimes when we do find reasons, they are not good ones.

"God will not give you more than you can handle." Where's that in the Bible?" Who said God gave it to you? The very reason we can't handle things is one reason why we need God.

Just saying things doesn't make them true but sometimes we start to believe them. Even though God never gave people a license to hate, they did. They said it enough. They believed God allowed them to hate their enemies.

Jesus said, "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"

Now Jesus brings them a new word: ⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!"

During the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the few clergy that stood up to the Nazis and the Third Reich. He worked as a double agent and was eventually imprisoned by Hitler.

Bonhoeffer lost no love for the Nazis, but when he was imprisoned, he was kind to and befriended those who guarded him.

The Nazis were his enemies and he opposed what they were doing. He actively opposed them, but he still found it possible to act lovingly toward those who were his guards.

It is possible to oppose people, disagree with people, and be on opposite sides of issues and still extend to them kindness and hospitality.

It is possible, but it is rare.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he isn't telling us to have warm feelings for them as we would for a friend. However, he is telling us how we should act toward them.

We see Jesus doing this toward the soldiers who came from him in the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus is telling us what kind of actions we should have toward them. The Greek word of love in this verse is a verb. It describes the kind of action we should be taking toward those who oppose us and persecute us.

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has told us that retaliation is off the table. Now Jesus is saying that not only is it off the table but now Jesus is saying that in its place should be acts of kindness.

Why would anyone want to be kind to an enemy, which includes praying for those who persecute you?

Again, this doesn't have anything to do with warm feelings toward those that oppose us. Instead, it has everything to do with the love we have for God. Because we love God, then we act lovingly toward our enemies.

1. Jesus says that doing this shows a desire on our part to be children of the Heavenly Father.

When we show kindness to our enemies, perhaps more than any other time, we reflect the character and nature of our Heavenly Father.

When I was a boy, I used to take a bus home to my grandparents on occasion and the bus driver always called me "little Baker." I think he thought his teasing would bother me. What he didn't know is that it was an honor to me to be called by my grandfather's name.

When we love our enemies, some people are going to pick up on what we are doing and try to use this as a character flaw and a weakness. They may ridicule us for doing this. But when they do, we should just know that they have noticed that we are reflecting the nature of Christ. Worshipping God is more than what we do in church. It is living out the commands of Jesus.

2. *When we are kind to our enemies, we are being like God, who shows mercy and kindness to everyone, not just to those that deserve it.*

There is a wideness in God's mercy and in his grace that we cannot grasp or understand. We should be thankful for that aspect of God, because we all need a God, whose grace and mercy is very wide.

The moment we think we don't, we might better be careful about our self-righteousness getting in the way of our relationship with God.

If God's grace and mercy are wide by nature, then we should also practice a wide extension of grace and mercy to others, and that includes our enemies.

3. *This doesn't mean our kindness or generosity should not have boundaries or limits. It does mean that the kindness to our enemies should be one of the things that differentiates us from others.*

Jesus said that you expect friends to be kind to friends and pagans to be kind to pagans. What you don't expect is for people to reach out and befriend an enemy.

At the turn of the 20th Century, the Detmer Woolen Company was the world's largest distributor of woollens. Once the company sent one of its customers a bill informing him of a note that was still on the books. (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie, Simon and Schuster, pgs. 94-95)

The man wrote letters to the credit department saying that he didn't owe the money. When he couldn't get any satisfaction, he packed his bags and went to Chicago. (Ibid)

He and the founder of the company knew one another and this might have helped him get access to Mr. Julian F. Detmer himself. (Ibid)

The customer was one of those people you'd gladly like to lose to a competitor. No profit is worth the frustrating inability to satisfy these people.

The customer went to Mr. Detmer's office looking for a fight and expecting one.

The disgruntled customer made it clear that he was not going to settle for anything less than being treated with the respect he thought he deserved and nothing less than having debt wiped clean because he was sure he didn't owe it. (Ibid)

After listening to all he had to say, Mr. Detmer said, "I want to thank you for coming to Chicago to tell me about this. You have done me a great favor, for if our credit department has annoyed you, it may have annoyed other good customers, and that would be just too bad. Believe me, I am far more eager to hear this than you are to tell it." (Ibid)

He assured him that his debt would be taken off the books because he was a careful man with only one account to look after and they had thousands so he was less likely to be wrong than they were. (Ibid)

Then he began to recommend other woolen houses where the man could take his business since he wasn't going to buy from them anymore. (Ibid)

Then he went one step further. Since the men had shared lunch on previous occasions, he invited him out to eat. The man accepted reluctantly. (Ibid)

When they returned, the customer placed a larger order than he ever had, and even suggested that he look over his bills. (Ibid)

Guess what. He found the one he had not paid. He later sent them a check with apologies. (Ibid)

The disgruntled customer had entered Mr. Detmer's office his enemy and because Mr. Detmer had shown kindness to him, he had left a friend.

Most of us would not have taken the time Mr. Detmer took or cared enough about the relationship to show any kindness to someone who had become an adversary.

What the customer needed was for someone to demonstrate that he cared about him as a human being.

I don't care if you don't call that love. But it did change things.

The customer came looking for a refund and a fight. He left with a relationship. He was treated with respect, even though he was wrong.

I have no idea if Julian F. Detmer was a Christian. Perhaps he just understood human relationships and knew how to treat customers.

You might argue that even a good Jew or Mormon could have done what Mr. Detmer did. I would say, "You are right."

But Jesus once used a Samaritan as an example of someone who showed compassion, rather than a priest and a Levite. Both had the opportunity but did not.

What matters is that in a world where people feel that they are getting the shaft, that the government is going to take one more thing away from them, where relationships are falling apart in families and at work, where people are chasing after things that are passing away, where the world around us continues to be filled with decay and darkness, you have a word of truth that matters. You are the Salt and the Light. You have the Spirit of Christ living within you. You know the way and the Way, the Truth and the Life.

If you love your enemies, you can change the world.

Is there anyone that's willing to follow Jesus in this way? Is there anyone who wishes to go against the current of the world that mistreats you, flips you off, cuts in front of you, shortchanges you, wounds you, leaves you, and instead of hating them for what they've done to you, in return you love them?

Loving your enemies isn't about feeling; it is about action. Loving your enemies is about acting in loving ways toward those who have not earned your love or deserve it.

You may not win them over, but the calling card you leave is that you are a follower of Jesus.

First responders understand this kind of love. They would not call it love, though. They would just call it doing their job.

Sometimes a first responder or a nurse is called to help an individual that is volatile. Yet those first responders step in and help even if they are never thanked for what they do.

If you love your enemies with the expectation that you are going to be loved in return, you are in for a disappointment.

But if you love your enemies as a part of your worship of God, then your life will be fulfilled, and many times, so will the lives of others.

Sermon Notes

Which law did Jesus challenge?

What new commandment did Jesus give the people?

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, is he telling us to have warm feelings toward them?

Jesus is telling us what kind of _____ we should take toward them.

Praying for our enemies shows three things:

- A desire on our part to be _____.
- That we are being like _____, who shows mercy and kindness to everyone, not just those that deserve it.
- That we are different from _____.

If you love your enemies, will you always be loved in return?

What do you see as the benefits of carrying out this command of Jesus?