

Matthew 5:38-48 Feb 23, 2014 The Savior's Sermon: Love enemies

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Today we hear Jesus say: "**Love your enemies.**"

"Love my enemies?" Human emotions & thoughts spin in confusion. "This is too much to stomach. What a crazy idea." "Give Love" to those who flat out don't like me. "Do good" to those who have got a vendetta against me.

Our first reaction, coming from our sinful nature, may very well be: I want them to have to feel the way they made me feel; I want them to suffer like I've had to suffer because of them.

Love the other kid who ruined my reputation at school with lies, or laughed at me in front of all my friends? Love the coworker who took the credit for my work or poisoned management's opinion of me, in order to snatch the better perks or pay? Wow.

You don't have to go off to war, in order to run into enemies. You have enemies right here at home. But... don't hate them. Jesus says, "Love them."

"Well, it's right there. I can't argue with Jesus' words. But, I have this other question churning up my gut now: How? How is it possible?"

Look no further than Jesus. [PP] Which best describes God's love to fallen humankind?

- a) the love of a father to a child
- b) the love of someone who has been treated like an enemy, but acts like a best friend to you
- c) the love of a friend to another person who has been a friend to them

While you're thinking over your answer, let's talk briefly about the Greek word for love used by Jesus in vs.43-47: "agape." First of all, it's important to note: it is not merely an emotion. Primarily, in fact, this is love expressed in action. Such Agape love seeks the good and the best interest of the one being loved.

Back to our question: Which best describes God's love? [project emphasis on "a", with a "but"] A parent's love for a child is often used in comparison with God's love for us. But, an added piece of the picture is needed (Luke 15; Eph.2:14-19). Picture children who reject anything to do with their father. They despise him and his name ~ they even revel in hanging out with his enemies and in doing those things they know he has lovingly warned them against. Totally defiant and rebellious ~ that describes the relationship of fallen humankind

to God. Yet look what God did for us. He dove into our mess. He fought for us. He went through Hell for us. He died for us. All in order to bring you and me into his family.

And so we arrive at the answer we especially are drawn to today: [project emphasis “b”]

Romans 5:6 *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for **the ungodly**.* 7 *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.* 8 *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still **sinner**s, Christ died for us.*

His love sought our good, even though we were enemies. His love acted to rescue us. His love has changed everything about us: we are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, with a glorious eternity waiting for us.

In view of all He – in love – has done for you, God calls you to love. Yes, even when you are hurt, despised, rejected, and treated like an enemy. Recall... Agape love is primarily action. God is not telling us to have some warm, fuzzy feeling toward our enemies, or to feel some sudden, overwhelmingly close connection to them. He is telling us to understand their deep spiritual need – to think of their eternal wellbeing. You see, they may be in the grip of Satan.

That’s something very important for us to remember: understand who the real arch enemy is... one who is just as eager to devour you and me, as he is to devour our “enemies.”

Let’s get into the specifics, then, of the examples Jesus gives. You’re going to see that they are practical ways to love enemies.

We’re back to our pattern from last week. Jesus again states: “you have heard... but I tell you.” Listen to the worldly view being spread amongst God’s people: vs.43 *“Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.”* *But Jesus tells you: “Love your enemies...”*

This is so different from the way the world thinks & acts. Look at a very practical example. Again, there was a thought being spread amongst God’s people that wasn’t from God. Vs.38-39 – *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you: Do not resist an evil person.”*

We may feel conflicted at these words. What does Jesus mean? He was not announcing, “It’s open season on Christians. Take your shot.” God stands by his Word: He has given us life; He wants us to care for and protect the lives of those entrusted to us (Mediations vol.57, no.1 p.88). He is not asking the soldier to hand over his weapon to the combatant who is out to wreak terror and death. The soldier, the police officer, the judge are the agents of the government. And the government is the servant of God to maintain order and punish the wrong doer. Ok. That’s God’s design.

The terrible problem Jesus addresses with these words is: people were being encouraged to take the law into their own hands ~ to be vigilantes. That God never ok’ed. In fact, in the other two readings today we’ve heard: (Leviticus 19 & Romans 12) *“Do not seek revenge.”* Trying to “get even” is sin. And that includes more than “Eye for an eye” physical retaliation. Think how often we’ve fallen for the world’s way of doling out justice: “I’ll make that person see what it feels like...” - the shame, the loneliness, the loss, the embarrassment they put me through (Mediations vol.57, no.1 p.87).

Rather than that, God provides: 1) the authorities he has put in place for the purpose of handing out justice/punishment; and 2) that really fits with this too: let God handle justice. He handles justice quite well, perfectly well: just look through the Bible. God will ultimately condemn all who reject His grace, oppose Him and persecute His people. And all the while now He promises, *“In all things he will work for our good – the good of those who have been called according to his purpose.”* When the situation looks bleak and hopeless, he calls on us to trust him ~ yes, at times, this will mean going against what looks logical/reasonable, according to our limited understanding.

In Vs.40-41 Jesus provides illustrations, with a common ingredient: where injustice is faced, voluntary love is returned – in an abundant measure.

- For Vs.40: some people have mistakenly taken this to mean a Christian can't go to court to defend himself. But Jesus is simply giving a way that a Christian can show love. Love may lead me in certain cases to simply give an item up. I can choose to part with it, if I think it will help “overcome evil with good.”
- Vs.41 needs some explanation. Remember: the Romans occupied Israel. They had a law which stated that the Roman soldiers could order a person to carry their equipment for a mile. Jesus not only told the people to do what the law required, but he explained... love can even move me to “go the extra mile” ... all with God's goal in the heart: to overcome evil with good.
- In vs.42 Jesus is not commanding: if someone comes up to you and demands your house or all your food or all the money in your wallet, that you must hand it over. The Law for God's Old Testament people did speak of giving and lending. What it did was: forbade selfish lending. That is: you couldn't turn the need of another into a way for personal gain (taking advantage of the person), or turn a person away in need, simply because there would be nothing in it for you. So ... here is a way to display love.

If we struggle to love others – yes, even our enemies – let's return to our God's love for us. That's really where Jesus takes us in vs.45-47:

“...your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? ... And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the pagans do that?”

Follow Jesus' line of thought: What message do you get from a sunny day? Or, from a rain shower that waters the fields of crops? Answer: God loves us. That is more than “us” – believers. That is “us” – all people. That detail is important according to Jesus. So as we look back at our question describing God's love, [project an “X” on “c”] “C” – “the love of a friend to someone who has been a friend to them” – doesn't live up to God's love.

Let me throw a quote up here to drive this home:

“Don't you know ... what sort of good I [God] am doing? Ask the sun and the moon and the rain about it... Then you will see that I show innumerable benefits not only to My Christians but even more to the wicked people, who are not grateful to Me but repay Me with their intense persecution of My Son and of Christians.”

Thus you [Christian] must be ashamed of yourself when you look at the sun, which preaches this to you every day, ashamed even when you are in a field and you look at a little flower or at the leaf of a tree. For this is written all over the leaves and the grass. There is no bird so small, indeed, no fruit or berry or grain so tiny, that it does not show this to you and say: "For whom do I bear my beautiful fruits and berries? For the vilest rogues and rascals on earth."

... He instructs his children to turn ... look at the Scriptures correctly if they want to be the people of God, to see correctly and to show love toward their enemies. In this way they could prove that their love was genuine and that they were God's children, as He shows His love to the ungrateful and to His enemies. [Luther, vol.21: the Sermon on the Mount. Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.]

You listen to that; then you look at this... Vs.48. *"Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect."* And...

We understand – our own record is far, far from perfect. Today we're especially confronted by an awareness of the ways we've failed to show love to those who have hurt us, wronged us.

Thank the Lord Jesus that he gifted us with his perfect life. Hebrews 10 explains that in these words:

14 ...by one sacrifice he [Jesus] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. ... 17 Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." 18 And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

God sees you: made perfect by Jesus. Through faith in Jesus, you are perfectly forgiven. Knowing that, out of thanks for that, we have Christ-like love as our desire: we want our will and actions to line up with God's will and actions. To that, let's say: Amen!