



## BEYOND FORGIVENESS

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:43-48

15th Message

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I became a Christian during my sophomore year at Long Beach State University. I had already read most of the New Testament before I asked Christ to come into my life. I sensed that this decision was going to radically alter not only my destiny and character, but my vocational plans as well. I was right. In the next school year I transferred to a small Bible college a few miles away, from a school with an enrollment of 30,000 students to one with only 250. But the greatest shock to me was the number of rules this new school had and how many in this new community defined what constituted righteousness. It seemed everyone had their list of what Christians should not do, whether it was the "dirty dozen" or the "nasty nine."

One Saturday I was in the library studying, which I thought was pretty noble, at least for me. The librarian approached me with a scowl on his face and told me I would have to leave. When I asked him why, he said, "You know why!" When I assured him I didn't, he told me that shorts were not allowed in the library. What a rude awakening to a newly converted young man! Soon I would discover that there were whole lists of activities that were considered worldly in that community. I am sure there are good reasons, from both the Christian and the non-Christian perspective, to not participate in many of the activities that were taboo, but if we define worldliness by a finite list of activities that we should shun, we are in danger of losing sight of what worldliness really is.

The Bible defines worldliness as an attitude of independence from God. "Who needs God?" the world asks. The world is a community of flesh-governed individuals (the flesh can be defined as our basic humanity, who we are apart from God). When we operate on that basis, we are being worldly. We may be doing good things, even activities like teaching Sunday School, for instance, and still be worldly if we are living independent of God.

This was how the Pharisees of Jesus' day operated. These teachers of the law insisted on defining righteousness in narrow, external ways. They had reduced and categorized God's law, narrowing its definitions and extending its permissions so that they could keep it. But in Jesus' remarks in the Sermon on the Mount he showed the Pharisees the true intent of the law, pointing out that its real purpose was to deal with their hearts, their stubborn independence from God and from their fellow men.

This is why Jesus began his discourse by describing what love looks like. Our basic problem is that we don't like people. But God wants to change that and produce in us a longing for reconciliation with him and our fellow men. As we have seen, we do not have the ability within ourselves to do this; it comes from God himself.

We come now to the highest point of this calling from God, set out in the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel. Chapter 5, verse 43:

**"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48, NASB)**

Once again, the Pharisees had blatantly perverted the law. The phrase, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy," is taken from Leviticus 19. Unfortunately, in the older editions of the New American Standard version of the Bible this entire phrase is rendered in capitals letters, indicating that it is a quotation from the Old Testament. But the second half of that quotation is not only missing from the text, it is a blatant misinterpretation of it. Moses said in Lev. 19:18, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

The Pharisees had missed the mark in two ways: they had left out certain things and added others to the commandment. They deliberately restricted both the standard of love, leaving out the words "as yourself" (a pretty high standard), and the recipients of that love, defining who their neighbor was by excluding their enemies and adding the command to hate them instead.

It is amazing that the rabbis would have argued for their interpretation. They would have said that Leviticus 19 was written to the people of Israel, giving instructions to them concerning their responsibilities to their own parents, and more widely, their brothers and neighbors. They would quote the verses in that same

chapter which read, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly"; "Do not go about spreading slander among your people"; "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord"; "Do not hate your brother in your heart," and they would argue that their "neighbor" was a Jew, a fellow Israelite, one who belonged to their race and religion. They held that the law said nothing about strangers or enemies. Thus, since the law commanded them to love their neighbor, they held that it implied they should hate their enemy. And they hated Gentiles with a passion. They called them dogs. They would have nothing to do with them. They wouldn't eat with them or speak to them. They lived in isolation, even though they were surrounded by Gentiles.

But such logic is strong enough to convince only those who want to be convinced and who are looking to defend their own prejudices. The Pharisees would have to ignore so much of the very Scriptures they claimed to know so well. That same chapter in Leviticus instructed that they should leave the gleanings of their fields and vineyards for the poor and the "sojourner," who was not a Jew but a resident alien. They would have to ignore the powerful statement at the end of the chapter which speaks to racial discrimination: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:34).

And there are other commandments which they would have to ignore: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it" (Exod 23:4-5). "If you see your brother's ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to him" (Deut 22:1). In other words, they were commanded to treat their enemies' belongings the same way as their brothers'. The rabbis must have known the teaching of the book of Proverbs, which the apostle Paul later quoted, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Prov 25:21).

So the rabbis had no justification for changing God's command to love their neighbor into a permission to hate those who hated them. Nowhere in Scripture does God teach his people a double standard of morality, one for friends and one for enemies.

That is why Jesus goes on to contradict the Pharisees' gross distortion of the law with these words:

**"But I say to you, love your enemies,**

As Jesus so clearly illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbor is not necessarily someone from our own race, religion, economic status or social standing. He may not have any connection with us. He may even be our enemy, someone who is out to get us. In God's vocabulary, "neighbor" includes one's ene-

my. What makes him our neighbor is that he is a fellow human being in need, and we are in a position to help.

Jesus continues:

**love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**

In other words, love your enemies, because that is what God does. God loves unbelievers. The rains fall on the lands of non-Christian as well as Christian farmers. The sun shines on the fields and lives of the most hardcore pagans. That is because God loves them. He sends joy and happiness and a measure of peace into the homes of non-Christians as well as Christians—because he loves them. And so must his sons and daughters. If we are going to reflect the family likeness, then we need to love people as God does.

And that love will be reflected in both our words and actions. True love is not merely feeling compassion; it is practically meeting the needs of others. Our enemy is trying to hurt us, but we must try to help him. He seeks our harm, we must seek his good—because that is how God treats us. We must remember that when we were God's enemies, when we hated him and blatantly opposed him, Christ died for us in order to reconcile us to God.

And words are powerful tools to express our love. Jesus said, "Bless those who persecute you." Here we are commanded to pray for our enemies. Many see this as the pinnacle of Christian love. Bonhoeffer said, "This is the supreme command. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God."

Praying for our enemies may be an internal expression of love, but it is also a way to increase our love as well, because it is impossible to keep on praying for people without discovering that our love for them is growing. So we should not wait to feel differently about someone before we pray for them. If we pray for them daily we will see our own hearts change. Remember Jesus prayed for his enemies while the iron spikes were being driven through his hands and feet, not when the crucifixion was over and men were sorry for what they had done, but in the very moment when it was being carried out. In fact, the tense of the verb indicates that Jesus kept on repeating his prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." If the cruel torture of a crucifixion could not silence our Lord's prayer for his enemies, what pain inflicted by others can possibly justify the silencing of ours?

Jesus continues his discourse by asking a series of questions (verse 46):

**"For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the**

**same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:46-48)**

By “perfect,” Jesus means complete in regard to love. “Perfect” means to fill something out to its fullest extent. Jesus wants us to love people like God loves them. Nobody can be perfect in the sense of being sinless, but because we have the love of God resident within us we can love people on a deeper level. We can even love those who don’t love us. That is why Jesus says, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same?”

Fallen man is not incapable of loving. The fact that humanity is depraved doesn’t mean that men and women can’t do anything good at all, but simply that the good they do is tainted in some way. Unbelievers can love. Parental love, friendship love, romantic love, all of these are the regular experiences of those outside of Christ. Jesus says even the tax gatherers (the petty customs officials who because of their extortion had a reputation for greed) loved those who loved them.

But all human love, even the highest and noblest, is contaminated in some way by the impurity of self-interest. Christians are called to something greater, something that is impossible apart from the grace of God: to love our enemies (a love in which there is no self-interest). If we love only those people who love us we aren’t any different than extortionists. If we hang around only our brothers and sisters than we are no better than pagans.

Jesus’ question is, “What are you doing more than others?” Is there anything really special about us? What do our non-Christian friends think of us? Do they regard us merely as people who don’t do certain things, who go to meetings, carry Bibles, use a certain vocabulary, dress a certain way and have a strange code of ethics they find it difficult to relate to? Or do they see us as people who genuinely love them, care for them and are interested in them to an extent that no one else is? That comes from God—and it can only come from God. Not one of us can live like that.

I want to share with you a story of a college student at Duke University who went to hear Tony Campolo speak and as a result responded to Campolo’s invitation to sign up for an inner city ministry in Philadelphia. Here is his story, in his words:

“In mid-June I met about a hundred other kids in a Baptist church in Philadelphia. We had about an hour of church. We were really worked up, all enthusiastic and ready to go. Dr. Campolo then preached for about an hour, and when he finished, people were shouting, standing on the pews clapping. It was great. “Okay, gang, are you ready to go out there and tell em about Jesus?” he asked. “Yeah, let’s go,” we shouted back.

“Get on the bus!” Tony shouted. So we spilled out of the church and onto the bus. We were singing, clapping.

But then we began to drive deeper into the depths of the city. We weren’t in a great neighborhood when we started riding, but it got worse. Gradually we stopped singing, and everybody, all of us, were just staring out the windows. We were scared. Then the bus pulled up before one of the worst-looking housing projects in Philadelphia. Tony jumped on the bus and said, “All right gang, get out there and tell ‘em about Jesus.” We made our hesitant way off the bus, stood there on the corner and had prayer, then we spread out. I walked down the sidewalk and stopped before a huge tenement house. I gulped, said a prayer, and ventured inside. There was a terrible odor. Windows were out. No lights in the hall. I walked up one flight of stairs toward the door where I heard a baby crying. I knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” said a loud voice inside. Then the door was cracked open and a woman holding a naked baby peered out at me. “What do you want?” she asked in a harsh, mean voice.

I told her that I wanted to tell her about Jesus. With that, she swung the door open and began cursing me. She cursed me all the way down the hall, down the flight of steps, out to the sidewalk.

I felt terrible. “Look at me,” I said to myself. “Some Mr. Christian I am. How in the world could somebody like me think I could tell someone about Jesus?”

I sat down on the curb and cried. Then I looked up and noticed a store on the corner, windows all boarded up, bars over the door. I went to the store, walked in, looked around. Then I remembered. The baby had no diapers. The mother was smoking. I bought a box of diapers and a pack of cigarettes.

I walked back to the tenement house, said a prayer, walked in, walked up the flight of stairs, gulped, stood before the door, and knocked.

“Who is it?” said the voice inside. When she opened the door, I slid that box of diapers and those cigarettes in. She looked at them, looked at me, and said, “Come in.”

I stepped into the dingy apartment. “Sit down!” she commanded. I sat down.

I sat on the sofa and began playing with the baby. I put a diaper on the baby, even though I have never put one on before. When the woman offered me a cigarette, even though I don’t smoke, I smoked. I stayed there all afternoon, talking, playing with the baby, *smoking*, listening to the woman.

About four o’clock the woman looked at me and said, “Let me ask you something. What’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?” So I told her everything I knew about Jesus. It took me about five minutes. Then she said, “Pray for me and my baby that we can make it out of here alive.” And I prayed.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus asks, “And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others?” Authentic Christianity has that “more than” quality about it. It’s called grace.

We see a progression in these last two antitheses of Jesus. The first, which we looked at last week, was negative, “Do not resist one who is evil.” This one is positive, “Love your enemies.” The first was passive, calling

us to non-retaliation; the second is positive, calling us to an active love. Augustine put it this way, "Many have learned how to offer the other cheek, but do not know how to love him by whom they were struck." We must go beyond forgiveness to tender love, concerning ourselves more with the misery of the person from whom the criticism came than our own misery; showing our critics mercy, serving them, praying earnestly for them, refusing to wrong them or withdraw from them, taking their wrongs as God takes ours.

Is there a cost to living in this way? Certainly! But Jesus stated that paradox again and again: if we try to save ourselves, we will lose ourselves; if we lose ourselves for his sake, we will save ourselves in the end. It was one of his favorite sayings.

This means we must measure our lives by losses rather than gains; by sacrifices rather than self-preservation; by time spent for others rather than time saved for ourselves; by love poured out rather than love poured in. It's a rule of life: give away the truth that God has given to you and he will give you greater truths for yourself and for others. Give your time away and you will have more time to give. Set no limit on your love and you

will find in the act of loving that you have more love for others than ever before.

Let us pray as George MacDonald prayed: "O God, make me into a rock which swallows up the waves of wrong in its great caverns and never throws them back to swell the commotion of the angry sea from whence they came. Ah! To annihilate wrong in this way—to say, 'It shall not be wrong against me, so utterly do I forgive it!'"

1. Quoted in Doug Webster, *The Easy Yoke*, (NavPress, 1996) 135-137.

I am indebted to John R.W. Stott for his excellent book, *The Sermon on the Mount*. I have borrowed extensively from his lecture series.

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