

Perfect Love Perfects Discipleship

Pastor Chris Baker // 07.14.19 // Centralia FBC

Intro

Today we get to finish Matthew 5. We're not just closing a chapter today, we're closing a distinct unit of Jesus' teaching.

We refer to this section as the antitheses, that's just a word that means opposite. Six times Jesus says a version of 'You have heard that it was said, but I say' as He teaches the disciples what the heart of a Christian looks like.

The tension is between the appearance of righteousness, as laid out by Israel's teachers, these Rabbis who Jesus is refuting, and true righteousness. True righteousness has been the intent of God for His people for all time. That was the intent behind the laws of the Old Testament and Jesus illustrates how that is true across six different areas of life.

We're focusing on Matthew 5:43-48 this morning but I want to go all the way back to verse 17 to start this reading because that's the opening of this section. We've been here for seven weeks but we haven't read this entire unit in one sitting and I think it will be helpful for us to do so. In verses 17-20 Jesus clarifies His view of the law and then applies that law over the following verses. Let's see them together:

17 "Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

21 "You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. 22 But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister, will be subject to the court. Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire. 23 So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Reach a settlement quickly with your adversary while you're on the way with him to the court, or your adversary will hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out of there until you have paid the last penny.

27 "You have heard that it was said, Do not commit adultery. 28 But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 "It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce. 32 But I tell you, everyone who divorces his wife, except in a case of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to our ancestors, You must not break your oath, but you must keep your oaths to the Lord. 34 But I tell you, don't take an oath at all: either by heaven, because it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, because it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. 36 Do not swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black. 37 But let your 'yes' mean 'yes,' and your 'no' mean 'no.' Anything more than this is from the evil one.

38 "You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. 39 But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 As for the one who wants to sue you and take away your shirt, let him have your coat as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and don't 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 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Prayer

One scholar described this section of the sermon on the mount by saying it is God's way of allowing the holy heaviness of the Law to make us completely humble before God.¹ There is a weight to Jesus' teaching here and if you've been with us thetas several weeks I hope you've felt it. I know that I have.

But I hope you don't feel this weight as a crushing burden. If you belong to Christ this is a weight that has already been carried for us. Jesus isn't loading us down with heavy command after heavy command and expecting us to carry that weight up a mountain to earn God's approval. The road to heaven isn't paved with good intentions or good works. It has already been paved by the one who carried the cross of our condemnation.

¹ *Matthew, Preaching the Word Commentary Series*. O'Donnell, Douglas Sean. p. 142

Jesus is showing us that out of our spiritual poverty, out of our humble hearts, God will change us into people who are capable of supernatural purity, forgiveness, and even love. We've seen over-and-over again in these verses that what true righteousness requires of us is the polar opposite of our heart's natural inclination.

That is especially true when it comes to loving our enemies. Let me put the thrust of Jesus' teaching in this passage as succinctly as I can: ***perfect love perfects discipleship.***

That is the theme of our message today from this text. The perfect love of God growing in us through His Holy Spirit perfects the way we love one another to the degree that we are capable of genuinely loving even those who are our enemies.

That is a radical idea, a uniquely Christian idea, and an idea that would have been foreign to Jesus' original audience.

Remember, Jesus begins these antitheses by un-teaching. He's not contradicting the truth of the Old Testament, He's correcting the untruth of the teaching of Jewish tradition.

Jesus begins all six of these sections by pointing to the false teaching of Jewish tradition. And in this one they were so close, weren't they? They taught love your neighbor. And that is good. Jesus called that the second greatest commandment later in Matthew:

Matthew 22:37 ***He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 38 This is the greatest and most important command. 39 The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. 40 All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."***

But love your neighbor had become perverted by the Rabbis of Jesus' day. They took a very narrow stance on who qualified as their neighbor. It was so limited, in fact, that we learn in 5:43 that they were teaching love your neighbor but hate your enemy.

The Rabbis' Perversion: Hate Your Enemy

This was an imperfect love, an incomplete love. They had taken the Old Testament Law and yet again cheapened it.

Leviticus 19:18 taught ***Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord. (leave on screen)***

The Rabbis were teaching love your neighbor but hate your enemy. I think the first thing that jumps out at us is hate your enemy, but do you notice something missing? The command was to love your neighbor how? As yourself.

The Rabbis had apparently neglected that very important distinction. Loving your neighbor as yourself doesn't leave much wiggle room for interpretation, does it? Love is probably the most overused word in our language today. There should probably be different words for the way I feel about my wife and the way I feel about tacos.

But we all love ourselves pretty well, don't we? We make sure we're happy, well-fed, clothed, and entertained. And the Old Testament Law pointed God's people to neighbor-love that mirrored the way we love ourselves.

Over time, man perverted God's law in such a way that we not only separated the way we love our neighbor from the way we love ourselves but we also lost the right concept of neighbor.

For Jesus' contemporaries, the definition of neighbor was extremely narrow. Who is your neighbor? The person across the street? What about the person three houses down? What about the person across town? I believe the best way for us to understand this idea is follow the advice Cuban-American pastor Eloy Cruz gave to former president Jimmy Carter. ***"You only need two loves in your life: for God, and for the person in front of you at any particular time."***²

And the Rabbis Jesus was contradicting here would have believe that, so long as the person directly in front of them was someone who looked like they looked, talked like they talked, and believed what they believed.

But if you were a pagan, someone who worshipped other gods or if you were a Jew who had joined up with the Romans as a tax collector, they felt no compulsion to really even care about you much less love you.

Listen to one of the ancient Jewish teachings that has been preserved for us: ***"As for Gentiles with whom we are not at war...their death must not be caused, but it is forbidden to save them if they are at the point of death; if, for example, one of them is seen falling into the sea, he should not be***

² **Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis**, Jimmy Carter, p.23

rescued, for it is written: 'neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy fellow'-but [a Gentile] is not thy fellow"³

This is the religious context into which Jesus is speaking. Israel's outlook on other nations was so dark that the Romans, the culture that perfected the execution method of crucifixion, accused them of hatred of the entire human race.⁴

We're going to look at Jesus' correction to this attitude in just a minute, but before we move to the end of verse 43, let me just caution us for a minute. The statement on the screen is easy for us to condemn. But it's not as far from our hearts as we think it is.

It's easy for us to love people who are like us, people who enjoy the same things, live in the same place, have the same skin color and cultural background. But when it comes to loving people who believe differently, have a different set of morals, vote differently, and who passionately advance causes that we think are evil then it becomes much harder to love them like we love ourselves, doesn't it?

How do we love someone who advocates for abortion that way? What about someone who abuses children? Should we love those people like we love ourselves? That's the goal Jesus lays in front of us in the verses we're studying this morning.

For some of us it's more personal. You have real enemies in your own life. People who have hurt you in a serious way. People who have in a very practical sense ruined your life. And here some preacher is standing up here and telling you to love that person? It sounds ridiculous. How is it even possible? And it's perfectly plausible for you to sit here today and be convinced it's impossible. That's a legitimate heart attitude to bring into a study of this text. And if that's where you sit I know the next few verses are going to be difficult for you to reckon with on a level that I cannot understand. But God understands. He understands your difficulty and He doesn't give a command here without empowering us to follow it.

We can't. On our own, anyway. And He never said we could. But He can and He will enable us through His Holy Spirit to grow in love even toward our enemies.

And Jesus shows us how in the remainder of our text. Jesus gives us here four reasons to actively love our enemies so that perfect love might perfect our discipleship. **Four reasons to actively love our enemies.**

³ *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Murder 4:11, accessed at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/israel-and-anti-gentile-traditions/>

⁴<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2225/love-your-enemies-part-1>

I say actively love here because Jesus opens this section with a clear call to action. Love your enemies can be ambiguous because of our broad definitions of love but pray for those who persecute you is pretty specific, isn't it?

Praying for someone—for God to work in their lives, for their own spiritual health and healing, is one of the greatest ways to grow in love for someone. It's extremely difficult to be angry with someone for whom you pray every day because through prayer God is also working on your heart.

When we love our enemies we're practicing the same type of love God practices, aren't we? There are a few different words for love used in the original language but the word for love in Matthew 5:44 is *agape*, the type of love attributed to God.

The question isn't who to love—because we are to love everyone—but how. How do we love? If we are to love like God we need to acknowledge that God loved the whole of humanity so much that He gave His only Son, and He loved the whole world even while we had declared ourselves His enemies (Rom. 5) by our disobedience.⁵

When we actively love our enemies we are loving them like God loved us. Why? First, because

It Identifies us as God's Children

Verse 45, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Jesus doesn't mean that our love for our enemies grants us salvation. That would fly in the face of the rest of the New Testament. Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us that we are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— 9 not from works, so that no one can boast.

The tense of the phrase 'may be children of God' indicates a once-and-for-all established fact. Loving like God loves doesn't make us children of our Father, it gives us—and the world around us—evidence of what is already true in our hearts.

Listen to 1 John 4 20 ***If anyone says, "I love God," and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister.***

⁵ MacArthur, John F. Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (Macarthur New Testament Commentary Serie) (Kindle Locations 8780-8782). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Loving others is a family trait when you belong to God. We all have some genetic things that run in our family, don't we? A lot of the people on my side of the family have what I like to call distinguished ears. It means they stand out. Loving others is a trait that stands out when you belong to God. So when we actively love our enemies from hearts that have been changed by the gospel we gain assurance that we are truly God's children.

And we're also allowing God to be God.

It Allows God to be God

Look at the last half of verse 45: *For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

The natural inclination of our hearts is not to love our enemies. I'd much rather see them get what they deserve. My fallen heart would rather spend its energy plotting some Wile E. Coyote scheme to see them hit with a rocket while driving down the road then lock myself in a room and pray for God to save them.

But vengeance against my enemies isn't my place. Listen to Paul in Romans 12:19, ***Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.***

And God does repay. God's justice is perfect. It may not seem so to us in the moment, but eternally that statement proves true. No one gets away with anything ever. Every sin ever committed was either paid for on the cross of Calvary or it will be paid for by an eternity spent in hell. There is no third option.

But there is some tension here I want to acknowledge. You could say, wait a minute. This same God who is telling us to love our enemies in the New Testament wiped out entire nations in the Old Testament. How do we balance that? Were the heretics right? Is the God of the Old Testament mean and evil and the God of the New Testament is good and loving? Not at all.

Justice is just as much an attribute of God as love is. And for God to be God He must uphold justice. And what we see in the Old Testament is not personal retribution, it is divine judgment and it's mostly rendered only after giving God's enemies generations to repent. God did command Israel to take Canaan, but He gave the people of Canaan over 400 years to repent. God punished their wickedness. And that foreshadows the punishment that is in store for those who have today declared themselves God's enemies by their disobedience.

But we ourselves are never given the option to punish our neighbor. When we love them instead of holding grudges, instead of plotting retribution, it allows God to be in His rightful position as judge.

Actively loving our enemies identifies us as God's children, allows God to be God, and it also marks us as different.

It Marks Us As Different

The original intent of the Law was both to establish God's standard of righteousness and to set God's people apart from those around them. That same truth is present in Jesus' words in verses 46-47

For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?

Anyone can love those who are easy to love. That doesn't require a supernatural act. That doesn't require radical heart obedience. It's easy to love people who are just like you.

But what about people who are different? One of the great joys of being a part of a local church is that we get to see every week a body of believers united in this room based on the simple fact that we belong to Jesus Christ. Some of us have some things in common, sure, but there is no other reason for people separated by generations, backgrounds, interests as many of us are to come together unless they're brought together by the gospel.

And we're not just called here to love people who are different, but people who are openly hostile toward us. That makes us starkly different than the world around us.

Matthew Henry once said, "Christianity is more than humanity. We know more than others. We talk more the things of God than others. We profess more than others. We have been promised more than others. God has done more for us and therefore He justly expects more from us than of others. He calls on us to love the unlovable."⁶

There are few characteristics of Christians that set us apart from the world more than our love for the unlovable.

⁶ <https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/god-s-law-vs-human-tradition-part-6>

I'm reminded of the experience of Jacob DeShazer. He was a bombardier aboard a B-25 that participated in what is known to history as the Doolittle Raid. On April 18, 1942, 16 planes launched from the USS Hornet to strike back at Japan just five months after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

DeShazer's plane was one of 15 that went down in enemy territory. Most of the crews escaped but DeShazer and six others were captured by the Japanese. DeShazer remained a prisoner until war's end. Only four of the seven survived, but what DeShazer did after the war was a shock to many. He earned a Bible degree from Seattle Pacific College and in 1949 returned to Japan as a missionary. He and his wife ministered there for 30 years and planted 23 churches.

Through his ministry, Matsuo Fuchida, the leader of the first wave of air attacks at Pearl Harbor, came to Christ and the two men preached to numerous crowds together.⁷ That is the kind of forgiveness that marks us as different and ultimately, it perfects our discipleship.

Perfects Your Discipleship

Verse 48: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

On the surface level that can be a crushing statement. Because none of us can be perfect. It's translated maturity elsewhere in Scripture. And when understood properly I think that instead of being a heavy weight it actually lifts a heavy weight from us.

If you're trying to fulfill this law on your own it's crushing. Because the law does require perfection. And it's impossible to keep it. That was the whole point of the Law.

But what does Jesus tell us? Matthew 19:26 Jesus looked at them and said, ***"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."***

How can we be perfect? By acknowledging that we are not, gazing upon the Christ who have fulfilled the Law on our behalf, and running toward Him.

What God demands from us He empowers us to accomplish. John MacArthur:

Man's own righteousness is possible, but is so imperfect that it is worthless; God's righteousness is impossible for the very reason that it is perfect. But the impossible righteousness becomes possible for those who trust in Jesus Christ, because He gives them His righteousness.⁸

⁷ <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/blog/post/former-pow-jacob-deshazer-returns-to-japan>

⁸ MacArthur, John F. Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Serie) (Kindle Locations 8896-8898). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

When I recognize my own spiritual bankruptcy, when I acknowledge how broken I am, God is so good that He will grant me the spiritual strength to love even my enemies. Let's pray.