

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, June 5, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:43-48

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.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #17 PERFECT LOVE

We’ve celebrated our graduates this morning and I know that many of our school aged children are celebrating that this is their last week of school for the 2010-2011 school year. By Friday, the majority of our students will have finished another school year. Do you remember what it felt like to have one week left of school? I couldn’t wait for summer vacation to start! I had a hard time concentrating on any kind of school work that last week of class. Tests were tough to study for. I just wanted to be done.

Well today, we reach the end of the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. It’s taken seventeen weeks of teaching for us to get here, and we are halfway done with Jesus’ sermon. So in honor of final exams, I want to give you a Sermon on the Mount midterm exam. For what we are going to hear from Jesus today, won’t make sense unless we look back a bit. Are you ready? Here we go.

- 1) Jesus begins his sermon with eight statements about how citizens of the kingdom of heaven live. What are those statements called? A: The Beatitudes
- 2) What was the first Beatitude? A: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 3) In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus compares His followers to two things that are a part of our everyday life. What are they? A: Salt and Light
- 4) What were two common uses of salt in the New Testament time? A: Flavor, Purifier, Preservative
- 5) When Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said,” what usually follows that phrase? A: But I tell you . . . and then a new teaching on an Old Testament truth

Over and over again in Matthew 5, Jesus teaches difficult truth. We read the Beatitudes and we think, “Who can live this way?” We read about Jesus’ radical calls to things like righteousness, purity, truthfulness, and more and wonder, “Who can possibly measure up the standard to which He is calling us?” We are told to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, whose entire lives, it seemed were committed to

God. It's impossible to read this sermon without being struck by our own depravity. And that's the point. We can't measure up to God's standards of righteousness.

In 1958 the *Christian Century* published an article by Dr. Normal Pittenger entitled, "A Critique of C. S. Lewis." Dr. Pittenger's critique had included many stinging accusations about C. S. Lewis based upon Dr. Lewis' writings. Among the critiques was one that said that C. S. Lewis cared little for the Sermon on the Mount. C. S. Lewis responded with an article of his own. In his article entitled, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," Lewis responded this way:

"As for 'caring for' the Sermon on the Mount, if 'caring for' here means 'liking' or enjoying, I suppose no one 'cares for' it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledge hammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure."¹

It was a perfect response. How does one respond to the Sermon on the Mount with any response other than of recognizing our own depravity and the need that we have for a Savior? Christ's demands are impossible apart from God. And for some, that can be a discouraging thing. But, I want you to think of it this way. If Jesus commands us to live the way that He does in this sermon, then Jesus has made it possible for us to do so. Kent Hughes writes, "It is possible for all of us to so progressively grow in our faith that all the characteristics of the Sermon on the Mount become progressively evident in our lives. Jesus believes we can consistently reflect the Sermon's extraordinary level, with his help."²

We're going to need that help today. For as Matthew 5 ends Jesus teaches what may be the most difficult truth for any of us to swallow; and, like he has done so many times before in this sermon, Jesus begins with a statement of the understanding of the Old Testament law as it was taught in First Century Palestine.

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

What's interesting about what Jesus does here is that he quotes the Old Testament law, but adds in what the people of His day had added in. The Old Testament law was found in Leviticus 19:18 and it says this, "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 law was simple. The Children of Israel were to love their neighbors as themselves. Nowhere did the Old Testament command people to "hate their enemies." So what happened? How had the accepted teaching in Jesus' day been that you were to hate your enemies? Many scholars believe that it had become assumed because of God's commands for the Jewish people to exterminate the Canaanites and other nations. Others think it is because there is a natural tendency for human beings to assume that when a

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 139.

² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

strong positive statement is made that there must be a strong negative statement that coincides with the positive statement. But to hate enemies is inconsistent with other Old Testament teaching.

In Proverbs 25:21 we read, “21 If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.”

In Exodus 23:4-5 we read, “4 “If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. 5 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.”

Hughes writes, “By Jesus’ time, this hatred of foreigners was so institutionalized that the Jews thought they were honoring God by despising anyone who was not Jewish. They had come a long way – down! The Qumran sect was typical for they said, ‘Love the brother; hate the outsider.’ The standard love in Jesus’ day was a limited love. ‘I will love only my neighbor [fellow Israelite], and I will hate everyone else. It is my duty. . .’ Not too many Gentiles were vacationing in Palestine.”³

Jesus was about to turn the practice of limited love upside down.

44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Alfred Plummer once wrote, “To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine.”⁴ And that’s true. There is nothing in us that naturally desires to love his or her enemy.

Have you had an enemy in your life? I’ve told you before about how God changed my heart over the first true enemy I had in my young adult life. I was working my first post-college job. I was a young married man and my office mate at my job really disliked me. He had spread some lies about me to my boss and co-workers. He had cheated me out of commissions. He was constantly belittling me. And, he had years worth of seniority over me. I didn’t want to go to work. My heart had grown so hard to this particular person. I remember telling my wife how much I despised this man. And that’s when she took me to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:44. “Brian,” she told me, “God has called us to pray for those who persecute us. We’ve been called to love our enemies. If ever there was an enemy in your life, it’s Greg. So, let’s pray for him.”

When we prayed, and understand that it was Cyndi praying first, but when we prayed God began to change my heart. Little by little I began to feel compassion for Greg. I began to understand that there were some really difficult things going on in his family. He was in tough financial shape. There were things going on that I had no idea about. Greg would eventually become one of my best friends. Praying for our enemies changes us, and often times changes them.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴ Alfred Plummer, *S. Matthew* (London: Paternoster, 1910), p. 89.

Jesus gave us two reasons to love and pray for our enemies.

First, loving and praying for our enemies helps us become more like God. Look at verse 45.

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.

To be “sons of our Father in heaven” was a Jewish way of saying that you would be like your heavenly Father. It should be the goal of every Christian to reflect Christ.

Wade Boggs is a hall of fame baseball player who spent years as the star third baseman for the Boston Red Sox. Somewhere along the way in his playing days, Boggs became a Christian. In his sermon, *Loving the People Who Don't Love You*, Marc Axelrod tells this Boggs story:

He used to hate playing at Yankee Stadium. Not because of the Yankees, they never gave him that much trouble, but because of a fan. The guy had a box seat close to the field, and when the Red Sox were in town he would torment Boggs by shouting obscenities and insults. And Boggs was a new believer, so he was wondering, ‘Lord, what do I do about this situation?’

One day before the game, while Boggs was warming up at third base, the fan began his typical routine, yelling, ‘Boggs, you stink! You’re a bum!’ Finally, Boggs decided he had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands with his friends, and said, ‘Are you the guy who’s always yelling at me?’ The man said, ‘Yeah, it’s me. What are you going to do about it?’

Wade Boggs took a brand new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field. The guy never yelled at him ever again; in fact, he became one of Wade’s biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.

Wade Boggs made a decision to love his enemy.”⁵ And, in doing so, Wade Boggs looked a little more like Christ.

Jesus gives us a second reason to love for and pray for our enemies. When we do, it sets us apart from the rest of the world. Look at verses 46-47.

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?

⁵ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=102378

Jesus is showing us that anyone can love those who love them. It is those who have been touched by God who have the ability to love those who hate them. Tax collectors were the greatest swindlers of Jesus' day. They were despised by the Jewish people because of the traitorous way that they aligned themselves with the Roman government and greedily took money that didn't belong to them. Jesus wanted the people to see that even the worst of the worst was capable of loving someone when they love them back. It is truly a God thing to love someone who treats you with disdain.

When we love people who haven't earned our love, it changes them.

Axelrod tells another great story in his sermon.

In 1976 Muhammad Ali was the heavyweight champion of the world. In defense of his title, Ali was preparing for a boxing match against Jean Pierre Coopman of Belgium.

"It was obvious from the first press conference that Coopman was a big fan of Ali. He kept hugging him and kissing his hand and asking for autographs.

And Ali said 'How am I supposed to get myself mad enough to fight this guy if he keeps hugging me and kissing me? He's taking all the fight out of me!'"

Axelrod writes, "That's exactly what Jesus wants us to do! He wants us to love our enemies so much that it takes the fight out of them! Romans 12:21 says 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'"⁶

Boy, it's tough! It seems as if Jesus' demands are just getting tougher all the time in this Sermon on the Mount. We're at the midway point of the sermon. There are two chapters left, but the teaching is divided into fewer sections for us. So, how are you doing with Jesus' radical demands of the citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven? Are you striving to live out the Beatitudes? Are you consciously making a decision to live as salt and light in your generation? Are you living with awareness that Christ is concerned more with your heart than he is your outward appearance? The chapter isn't quite over. There is one more verse. And, it is shocking.

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Okay, take a breath. That is impossible. You and I can never achieve the perfection that is reserved alone for God. "But, Jesus said it," you say. Yes, he did. And those who heard it in the First Century were shocked too.

How good do you have to be to get to heaven?

You have to be as good as God. You can't be, unless Christ places his righteousness upon you. The point is that nothing that Jesus has called us to do in the Sermon on the

⁶ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=102378

Mount can be produced in the natural self. It takes God working in and through us for the character traits of the citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven to shown in our lives. It's time to give up control of your life to Christ. Let Him do in you what only He can accomplish. It is the best thing.

Several years ago, Readers Digest published the following:

“People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest pride.

Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for some underdogs anyway.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway!”⁷

That's how a Christ follower lives. I hope you'll strive to love and pray for the most difficult people in your life.

SHOW VIDEO – LOVE YOUR ENEMY (1:38)

⁷ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=39108