

7. Love Your Enemy

Of all the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus, none separates the Christian from all others like Jesus' command in Matt 5:45: "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." The origin of the statement, "Love your neighbors," was the command 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 Jews added the clause—*hate your enemies*—as the logical extension of the teaching. They took the word *neighbors* to mean more than just those who live nearby, including in the word all their fellow Jews. All others were thus to be hated by exclusion. Now the Lord teaches that Christians are to love even their enemies. What a change in a world where most wars are between religious and philosophical enemies; such as protestant versus catholic, Muslim versus Jew, communist versus Christian—to name only a few. Even American politics has regressed to conflicts between groups holding contrary religious views: right to life versus freedom of choice; same sex marriages versus marriages between men and women; a Zionist view of Christ returning to establish David's earthly kingdom versus an exalted Christ on his throne at the right hand of God. Christians are to love their enemies regardless of their differences. This is, indeed, a difficult teaching.

The Enabling Spiritual and Mental Values

Matt 5:43-44: 44 "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 . . ."

This command of Jesus runs so contrary to human practice and human nature that it requires a fundamental shift in one's moral and ethical values. Jesus provided the basis of that shift in the beatitudes. In Matt 5:10-12, the Lord sets the moral and ethical standard for Christians:

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

No matter what the differences between God's people and their enemies, the Lord has said plainly, "Love your enemies." This love is no mere nod of mental acceptance. It involves action. "Pray for those who persecute you," is a command that requires positive action. In the sermon on the mount, the Lord had already taught Christians not to be angry and not to retaliate, suppressing the evil impulse before evil action gets underway. Now he teaches Christians to perform a positive act of love toward their enemies: pray for them.

Some late manuscripts include in verse 44, "Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you." These two commands add to the positive steps Christians must take to love their enemies.

A Condition by Which Christians Are Sons of God

Matt 5:45: . . . 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.

The teaching—that you may be sons of your Father in heaven—requires us to act on our love of our enemies. The highest reward goes only to those who meet this high ethical and moral standard. When one holds the values expressed in the beatitudes, one becomes like the Lord, mentally and spiritually. Symbolically, the New Testament speaks of this as a new birth. John 3:5-7 records Jesus explaining this spiritual birth: "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."'" Paul described how the birth occurs in Rom 6:3-4: "3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that,

just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." John used love and hate to separate the children of God from the children of the devil. In 1 John 3:10, he wrote: "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." Even God does not forsake completely those who are evil and unrighteous giving them the sun and rain to sustain their lives. The ethical and moral standard of Jesus is clear, and the result of maintaining it is clear: love your enemies and do good to them.

The Deception of Human Nature

Matt 5:46-47: 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?

Human nature deceives us. Certainly, we must love those who love us. And certainly we should greet our brothers. However, if this is all that we do, we are no better than tax collectors—a despised group among the Jews—and pagans—a group to be shunned by the Jews. To be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect is to hold out a benevolent and helping hand to our enemies. After all, God does give all men the sun and the rain alike; and the gospel call of Christ is open to all. Paul explained the degree to which we must go in Rom 12:19-21:

19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

As Perfect as the Heavenly Father

Matt 5:48: 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The beatitudes dwelling within us open the avenue to the perfection that is of God. Being perfect in this way makes it possible to love and do good to our enemies. The perfection described here—a perfection equal to God's perfection—is expanded in detail in 2 Peter 1. In 2 Peter 1:4, Peter gives direction on how to participate in the divine nature [the perfection of God]: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." In 2 Peter 1:5-7, Peter restated the values delivered by the Lord in the sermon on the mount: "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."

The end of these ethical and moral values is the attainment of the divine nature in this life. Peter continues in 2 Peter 1:8-9: "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins." Being perfect as God is perfect makes our calling and election sure.

Conclusion

The road to heaven is not what it seems. If we love and do good to our enemies, we will attain a Godlike perfection. That perfection will allow us a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom, according to 2 Peter 1:10-11: "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, 11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."