

## Week 11 – Love Unlimited – Matthew 5:43-48

### Scripture Reading: Leviticus 19:9-18

#### Introduction

Those of you who have listened to me for very long know that I often remark how we have not really progressed all that much, or perhaps at all, since Bible times

Oh, we've certainly progressed in a technological sense but not when it comes to the basics

People are still people and we have the same underlying frailties and are subject to the same failures as those who came before us

When reading the Bible it's startling how often the accounts we read about could have been taken straight from the things we see going on all around us today

And that reality is patently evident when it comes to our affections and how we view one another

One could make the case that our culture has never been more divided – at least at no time since the Civil War that is Politically, we have become quite tribalistic in our affections – we love those who are on our side and hate those who are on the other side

When I was a kid, I knew there were different political opinions out there but people genuinely seemed to be able to accept each other's opinions and not allow them to become divisive – but that doesn't seem to be the case today

Whereas people used to be able to disagree and remain respectful and even friendly, nowadays it seems as if every person who thinks differently than we do must be made into a villain

And even those who claim to be protesting for tolerance and acceptance pour out hatred, venom, and even violence on any who dare to disagree with them

In fact, as we all saw on the news, a young man was gunned down in the street recently just for wearing a hat that his killer disagreed with

We all have a natural kinship with those who are most like us and we are prone to have closer, more loving relationships with people with whom we share commonalities

We all love our friends and birds of a feather tend to flock together

And I think that's okay – I don't really believe that is something we need to change

The problem isn't with whether we have a natural affinity for someone or some group

The question, though, is what about the "others"?

What should our attitude be toward those who are different?

Shouldn't we be able to choose whether to love someone?

What about those who have declared or demonstrated that they are against us? Can we hate an enemy?

Those are some of the questions we will try to answer this morning as we take up the final illustration Jesus used in this section of the Sermon on the Mount

We will begin once more by looking at the traditional teaching which is a **love/hate** duality

Then we will look at what Jesus taught which is **love everyone**

And then we will wrap up by considering the ultimate requirement Jesus reveals for a citizen of the kingdom which is **perfection**

Please join me in Matthew 5 and follow along as I read verses 43-48 [**Matthew 5:43-48**] (page 811)

*“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, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Once again, Jesus begins by stating the common teaching being espoused by the Jewish religious leaders

## **I. Traditional Teaching: Love/Hate**

Look with me again at verse 43 [**Matthew 5:43**] –

*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’*

The first part of their teaching comes from **Leviticus 19:18** which was the final verse of our Scripture reading

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

Notice though that the last half of the teaching, *“and hate your enemy”*, isn’t found in that verse

As a matter of fact, you could search the entire Old Testament and never find that command – it’s not there

The scribes and Pharisees had changed the meaning of Leviticus 19:18 by adding the phrase *“hate your enemy”*

But they also changed it by subtracting the modifier *“as yourself”* from the command to love one’s neighbor

And with those two modifications they changed the verse from being a command about how to love into a command about who to love

And then they narrowed the scope of the verse through their understanding of the word *“neighbor”*

Over the years, the Jews had come to believe that *“neighbor”* meant only their fellow Israelites and anyone who was not Jewish would never be considered to be a neighbor

They can perhaps be somewhat excused for thinking that way as they looked back historically at God’s instruction regarding their relationship with other nations such as his command to remove the Canaanites from the land

In fact, God originally told them to utterly destroy the Canaanites lest they corrupt Israel

What they once again failed to recognize was the fact that those commands were given to the nation as a whole to be exercised militarily on a national scale and were not meant to be carried out by individuals on a personal level

Just as we saw last week with God’s instruction regarding limited retaliation for injuries

But by Jesus’ day the hatred of foreigners was so deeply ingrained the Jews actually believed they were honoring God by despising anyone who was not Jewish – they believed it was their sacred duty to hate all non-Jews

Jesus addressed the issue of neighborliness directly in **Luke 10** when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the lawyer’s question, *“Who is my neighbor?”* –

But that teaching came later; after the Sermon on the Mount

Still, the religious leaders should have known better

After all knew about passages like **Exodus 23:4-5** which instructs –

*If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.*

And **Proverbs 25:21** which says –

*If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink*

Those are difficult commands aren't they?

Doing nice things for or being helpful to those who have wronged us or those who oppose us goes against our instincts  
Frankly, there are people who are not worthy of our love and there are people who have earned our hatred  
And according to human standards the right response is to love some and hate others and I think most of us would have very little trouble coming up with a list for both of those categories

But along comes Jesus and he has a different standard for his true followers

## **II. Jesus' Teaching: Love Everyone**

Again, in **verse 44**, we see the formula we've seen in all Jesus' illustrations, "But I say to you..." [**Matthew 5:43-44**]

*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*

Notice how Jesus drops the whole idea of "your neighbor" in verse 44 and goes straight to "your enemies" and "those who persecute you"

And what he says is quiet radical!

He says we are to love our enemies and to pray for those who are actively persecuting us

Honestly, that sounds like an absurd and perhaps even an impossible command because it goes so directly and forcefully against our natural sense of right and wrong – it's foreign to our way of thinking

While we would agree that returning evil for good would itself be evil, we think it's perfectly normal and even appropriate to return good for good and evil for evil

But to return good for evil is a different thing altogether – how can we be expected to love those who don't love us and to pray for those who do us harm?

Perhaps we would do well to take a little bit of time to make sure we understand what the word "love" means here

Jesus is not saying that we are expected to love our enemies in the same way or to the same degree that we love our family, our friends, and those to whom we are naturally attracted

We all have people who we just love with a spontaneous, instinctive love that requires no effort on our part and Jesus isn't saying that should exist for everyone we encounter

Jesus doesn't say that we need to have family love or friend love or emotional love for our enemies

Jesus actually doesn't even say we have to like our enemies – he says we have to love them with a specific kind of love

What he says we must have is *agape* love and *agape* love is intentional love

*Agape* love is a decision, a determination to act in a specific way – to do things that manifest goodwill and kindness to another – even if, and perhaps especially if, doing so goes against our instincts and our desires

And when Jesus says "*Love your enemies*" that is a present imperative that calls for us to consistently and constantly love them at all times – the same thing is also true of the command to pray for our persecutors

Jesus says our habit should be to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us

### **And then he tells us why**

**First**, in verse 45 [**Matthew 5:45**] Jesus says doing so makes us like God

Remember, we saw in a previous sermon that saying someone was a "son" indicated that they were another of exactly the same kind so what Jesus is saying is that we become like God as we love our enemies and pray for our persecutors

And then he used the example of God demonstrating his impartiality through sending sun and rain on the just and the unjust

We also have the example of **John 3:16** which tells us of God's love for the entire world and of **Romans 5:8** which tells us that God sent his Son to die for us "while we were still sinner" – in other words, while we were still God's enemies as we see in **Romans 5:10**

Back when we considered **Matthew 5:12** a few weeks ago, we saw that our persecution aligns us with the prophets and today we see that in doing good for our enemies and praying for those who do us harm we have the character of God

The **second reason** Jesus gives for loving our enemies and praying for our persecutors is that it sets us apart from the rest of the world

In verse 46 [**Matthew 5:46**] Jesus uses the example of tax collectors who were probably the most reviled class of people in his day

They worked for the Roman government and they enriched themselves by exploiting their own countrymen

Tax collectors were rich crooks who were loathed by almost everyone

But even tax collectors had family and friends who they loved and who loved them in return

So Jesus points out that to love those who reciprocate your love is not great feat – even tax collectors do that

And he doubled down by saying in verse 47 [**Matthew 5:47**] that even Gentiles greet their own brethren

Now, a greeting in Jesus' day typically came with some sort of blessing meaning that a Jew would not normally greet a Gentile or vice versa because to do so would be to confer a blessing on someone you considered to be an enemy

And Jesus says, to stop there; to only greet those who are like you, was nothing special – literally everyone does that

Of course, the implication is that a follower of Jesus should do more than what is common among unbelievers

Dean Martin's signature song was "That's **Amore**" and amore, of course, is Italian for love

But, if you'll allow me to make a bad play on words we should be asking if our love is the same as the world's or if there is a "more" to our love

Would anyone see God in us by the way we treat those who treat us badly?

God loved us enough to send his Son to die for us even though we were at enmity with him

Jesus loved us enough to go to the cross for us

And Jesus prayed for those who crucified him – possibly even as they were driving the nails through his hands and feet

In fact, the verb tense used in **Luke 23:34** indicates that Jesus prayed for his executioners repeatedly

Now, you might protest that Jesus could do that because he is Jesus but it's too heavy a load for you to lift

But, as we will see next, the standard that the kingdom of heaven requires of us is nothing less than perfection –

### **III. Ultimate Requirement: Perfection**

Look with me at verse 48 [**Matthew 5:48**]

*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

The word translated as "perfect" here means to be complete in a moral sense – to not be lacking in any moral quality

While the immediate context here is in the area of loving one's enemies, I believe Jesus means for this statement to sum up all of the six illustrations he has just laid out

The perfect man or woman, therefore, would never violate the prohibition against harboring unrighteous anger, would never have a problem with sexual purity in their heart, would reverently honor the marriage covenant, would always be

perfectly honest, would never retaliate for personal wrongs, and would love and pray for everyone – even those who are enemies seeking to do them harm

If, and that is a very big “if” that makes all the difference, if someone could live according to the standard Jesus lays out in Matthew 5 he or she would be perfect

But we know there is not the slightest chance than anyone is going to perfectly meet the standard that he has laid out

Honestly, I don’t know how anyone who is serious could read through Matthew 5 and feel good about themselves

The Beatitudes, as beloved as they are, when properly understood are eight hard punches to the gut

And when we recognize the exclusivity of those statements we can even be left to wonder whether we will enjoy the rewards mentioned because we know we don’t fully embody any of the characteristics necessary to receive them

Can any of us say that we have truly been salt and light and provided the powerful witness described in those verses?

Then come the six illustrations we have looked at over the past 6 weeks showing us what the exceeding righteousness looks like and we are left wanting

Then to close the chapter we find the statement – *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

How could anyone who understands the implications of the Sermon on the Mount thus far feel good about themselves?

Jesus has just laid out a standard that we know we cannot attain – at least not on our own – and yet perfection is required

The fact that perfection is required and unattainable is what drives us to the cross of Christ – we have no other option if we want to be a citizen of the kingdom

And we can rejoice in the knowledge that God has already perfected us judicially at the moment we were saved by imputing Christ’s righteousness to us; that he is working in us and through us to incrementally perfect us in this life; and that he will perfect us ultimately at the moment of our physical death – God promises all those things

It’s his work to do and it will be done

Still, we are to strive for that we can never attain this side of heaven so that we might be incrementally conformed to the image of Christ and, as sons, demonstrate the character of our heavenly Father to a watching world

And in so doing, with God’s help, we will edge ever closer to the perfection that is required

## Conclusion

The command to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us is a seemingly impossible one

The truth is, it is a difficult command but it's not impossible – we just have to work at it

C.S. **Lewis** in *Mere Christianity* writes –

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less... The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he “likes” them; the Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, finds himself liking more people as he goes on – including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.

Is it impossible for you to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you?

No. If it were, Jesus would not have commanded you to do it.

Is it difficult? Yes. But it can be done if the desire to do it is there

Is it important? Absolutely; in fact it's necessary.

Aging Goth rocker Marilyn **Manson** is quoted as having asked –

When you're taught to love everyone, to love your enemies, then what value does that place on love?

I think that's a fair question

If we can't choose who to love and are commanded to love everyone indiscriminately; doesn't that devalue love?

In answer to that question I would have to say that's only true if we say God's love is somehow diminished because, as we've seen, he loves everyone without regard to anything about them

Consider this, it's been said that God actually provided five gospel accounts to the world

There are, of course, the gospel accounts according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John found in the pages of the Bible

But there is also the “gospel according to you” and as you live your daily life, people “read” your account of the gospel

How faithful is your gospel?

Will people know of the love of God through seeing how you love others?

Would anyone say that they can trust that God loves them because of the love you have demonstrated toward them?

They will if you allow God's unlimited love to flow through you – that's what we are called to do

And with all due respect to Mr. Manson, isn't that the highest form of love we can demonstrate?

Our desire should be that our enemies would be utterly destroyed in the best way possible; by turning them into friends and brothers

Let's pray