The Love Question

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[0:00] A question that would invite personal reflection, a question that would invite someone to reveal a little more of themselves, or sometimes, like this one here, a question can challenge prevailing assumptions and wrong ideas.

So just as we did last time, we're going to think about this question and ask ourselves, why is Jesus using it, in this case, in the Sermon on the Mount? What is he asking of us, and what can we learn from Jesus and his question?
His question there, verse 46, if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? So Jesus makes clear that everyone is capable of love.
We're made in the image of God, God who is love, and so everybody is capable of love for family, for friends, in community, in a church, for example. Now the challenge that Jesus identifies is how do we do when it comes to those who are unlike us?
Are we able to love those who don't like or love us? Perhaps related. You know, everybody I imagine would agree that forgiveness is a good idea as an aspect of love for others. It always seems a really good idea and such an important thing to ask until we are wronged.
[1:28] And then it becomes the challenge. Am I able to put it into practice? So Jesus forces us to ask ourselves the question, can I seek the best for someone who seeks my worst?

How are we able? How can we be able to do that? I mentioned at the beginning that event with Dr. Brayhain for Release International. So Eritrea is in the top, certainly in the top five most persecuted places on earth.
So there are tens of thousands of Eritrean Christians in prison camps, and Dr. Brayhain spent time there, and now he's actively serving Christians who are persecuted for their faith.
And I have no doubt that to listen to somebody speaking from that kind of context, bringing that powerful story of the grace of God that enables him to love, even in that setting, we'll find ourselves asking, could I do that?
How can he do that? This challenge to love our enemies is real. John Stott, a preacher down in London at the end of the 20th century, commented that nowhere, in his view, is the challenge of the Sermon on the Mount greater than in this little section.
[2:51] Nowhere is the distinctiveness of the Christian counterculture more obvious. Nowhere does it become more obvious that Christians are set apart as different, and nowhere is the need of the Holy Spirit more compelling than when it comes to the question of who we love and how we love.

So from this question, this conversation, we're going to think about three things briefly together. One, the mistake that we often make, which we see from the Pharisees that Jesus is responding to in their false teaching.
The model that we're called to follow, and the mercy that we need to receive. So let's begin with a mistake that we often make. In verse 43 and 44, Jesus is correcting a twisting of the law.
You have heard it said. This isn't you have heard it said in the Bible, but they've heard it said by their religious teachers. They've heard it said by the Pharisees.
But it's a twisting of the law that can so easily take place in a society, and indeed in our own hearts. So it seems that what's happened is that they've taken that quotation from Leviticus 19.18, which we read, you shall love your neighbor, and in the hands of someone with a sort of legalistic view, the logic applied is, well, in that text, it's written to Israelite people, and it only mentions fellow Israelites.
[4:22] Therefore, my neighbor must be somebody who is like me, who's part of my community. Therefore, and this is the extra step that they're taking, I am permitted to hate anyone who is an

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enemy, anyone who is a stranger, anyone who is other.

So they take a demanding law, love your neighbor as yourself, and they're twisting it to try and read it in as convenient a way as possible, to make it comfortable for themselves.
So they set a really low bar, and they have a really limited focus. And so Jesus wants to explode that logic, because Jesus rejects, first of all, he rejects the narrowing that takes place in that thinking.
The narrow reading of love. So they hear, love your neighbor as yourself, and they think, well, my neighbor is somebody who is like me.
We read to the end of Leviticus 19, where the command continues, to love the foreigner who lives among you. In Exodus 23, we could go there, where Moses teaches from God, if you happen to be walking in the open country, and you meet your enemy's animal, it is your duty and responsibility to bring it back to them.
[5:49] So God's law says, there's not to be a double standard, based on differences between people, there's not to be a double standard, based on preferences. So Jesus rejects any attempt at narrowing this command, this reading of love.

He also rejects the narrow standard of love that they are applying. Because notice a phrase has been missed out. In Leviticus 19.18, God's law says, love your neighbor as yourself, but the Pharisees are only talking about, love your neighbor.
When we think about how much love and care we show to ourselves, if we miss that out, it becomes much easier.
But Jesus wants to have the more demanding level of love applied. One of the books I've been reading over the summer, rereading is C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity, which is a really interesting, helpful book in many parts.
One thing he says there is that as people, we consistently apply the saying, and we'll probably know the saying, you know, hate the sin, but love the sinner. He says the one person that we always apply that principle to is ourselves.
[7:06] You know, we will hate the sin that we see in ourselves, but we will still love ourselves. And C.S. Lewis says, and Jesus says, we need to apply that same principle to everyone.

Love your neighbor as yourself. So Jesus rejects that narrowing of the standard. And he also rejects that narrowing of the object of love.
Because remember, they added the phrase, and hate your enemy. That doesn't come from the Bible. It certainly is not what we see from Jesus. Remember Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan.
Why was that told? It was told to challenge another man who had a very convenient idea about how to keep the law. Jesus, tell me who is my neighbor?
What do they look like? And I'll tick the box. And Jesus tells the parable to say that any human being who we meet, who is in trouble, if we have the capacity to help, they're our neighbor.
[8:04] So Jesus is rejecting all of this narrowing. Maybe it's something of the natural tendency that we have as people to be exclusive in how we love.

We love our friends and our family. And there are certain types of people that we naturally connect with and we find them easy to love. But if we push that too far, and where we can go wrong is we can ignore those who are unlike us.
We can indeed despise people who are other than us. We see it, don't we, in our society? Perhaps we see it sometimes in our own hearts, that tendency to divide into them and us.
That tribalism that we see based on nationality or race or status or even a person's point of view. Jesus says that way of love is too narrow, and he isn't loving at all.
In many cases, Jesus rejects the narrowing that goes on, and connected to that, Jesus rejects the judging that takes place. In our relationships, with people that we know, and with people that we don't know, sometimes we're thinking about it, often we're not, but we are assessing, we can find ourselves assessing, what does this person deserve from me?
[9:29] And we often want to apply a rule of justice. How does that work? Well, if they do good to me, then I will do good in return.

But if you do bad to me, what's our instinct? I will return bad to you. If you snub me, if you upset me, if you disappoint me, if you hurt me in some way, we'll return like for like.

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We can often apply a rule of justice. What do your words and actions merit by way of my response? And when we think like that, and Jesus points this out, if our thinking is always judging, what do they deserve?
Are they like me or not? It plays out as love your neighbor, yes, but hate your enemy. And so we end up with these cycles of violence and revenge and the breakdown of relationships if we try to apply justice without mercy.
So Jesus rejects that kind of narrowing and judging, and instead he teaches active loving, doesn't he? You've heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
[10:49] Remember John Stott saying this is the most demanding part of the Sermon on the Mount. I remember years ago in Glasgow, I was part of an interfaith dialogue where we had eight minutes, different faith traditions had eight minutes on the topic, what does your holy book teach about love?

And this was the text for explaining in eight minutes what Christianity taught, what Jesus taught about love, and then the other faiths did the same with theirs, and there was like roundtable discussions, and at the end, the moderator asked for a vote, which was the most demanding of all the ethics that were talked about.
And to a person, everyone said, well, of course, it's the Christian ethic, because it's not just love for those who are like us, but it's love across difference, and it's love for an enemy.
It's a love that serves. Jesus is calling us to a love that seeks the good of others, regardless of what they want for us.
This isn't just, if somebody does wrong to me, I will be passive. Jesus is saying, you need to seek the good and to pray for enemies and persecutors.
[12:11] Again, to go back to C.S. Lewis and mere Christianity, he very helpfully gives this piece of advice when it comes to relationships with other people, don't wait to feel love towards them.

Act as if you already do, and allow the feelings to follow. But Jesus calls us to a love that serves, and even more than that, he calls us to a love that prays.
And this is hugely significant. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, this is the supreme command. What Jesus is saying to us here is that, in Bonhoeffer's words, through the medium of prayer, we go to our enemy, we stand by his side, and we plead for him to God.
It changes how we feel about another person when we pray for them. It is hard to continue to feel negatively towards someone when you go to a God of grace and mercy and you seek that in their life.
And when we think about a love that serves, and when we think about a love that prays, and we think that this is Jesus who's speaking to us, we know that he practiced what he preached.
[13:37] Isn't this what we see and hear at the cross? Jesus, in serving sinful humanity, in serving his own people, went to the cross to suffer and die, and died praying, Father, forgive them.

They don't know what they are doing. Well, let's move from there to think about what Jesus says in terms of the model that we are called to follow.
It's from verse 45 onwards. Jesus says, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven.
It's interesting that modeling and imitation is an important part of the Christian faith. You go to the Old Testament and you find that the responsibility of passing faith down through the generations. That would be through teaching, but also through imitation. Think about the ministry of Jesus. He called his disciples to him and they learned from him by watching, by listening, by observing, and then they were commissioned.
[14:49] Now go and do likewise. Think about Paul the Apostle being able to say to young Christians, imitate me as I imitate Christ.

To the extent that you see something Christ-like in me, pursue that. So modeling and imitation is a feature of our faith.
It's a good thing, I think. We need and value role models. Here are the rules. Here are the principles. Here are the examples by which we live and work and carry out relationships.
Perhaps we see modeling most clearly in a family setting. We have that related phrase like father, like son.

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So when people use that, sometimes that's purely about physical appearance. But it's often the case as well that children will pick up habits of speech, specific practices that they see from their parents.
[15:55] It's the more time that we spend watching and listening, the more likely we are to become like the person we observe. And think about what Jesus does here in his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount.

He has challenged, he said, no to having a low bar of love that frees you up to hate your enemy, only to love those who are like you. Now Jesus raises the bar.
Love like your Father in heaven. Show you are his children by the way that you love others. And I want us to notice two aspects of the Father's love that Jesus draws attention to.
First of all, it's inclusive. Look at verse 45, continues there, speaking about the love of the Father. Father, he causes his Son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
[17:01] There is no Christian weather forecast. There is no Christian weather system. There is no sense that Christians receive one thing and a person who has no thought of God receives something else when we think about common grace, the good things that we enjoy as we live in this world that God has made.

We all enjoy the kindness of God. Everyone in our city right now, we experience the same weather patterns. We have the same provision being made.
It's part of God's goodness to the people that he has made, giving us the things that we need and enjoy in life. Of course, we recognize that there is saving grace.
That's of a different nature. But Jesus here is saying that God gives his everyday kindness to all people, whether they're evil or whether they're good, whether they're righteous or whether they're unrighteous.
The worshiper on his knees, the average person on the street who has no thought of God, the atheist who says, I hate God, the same creator God gives the same breath to each of their lungs that enables them to either bless or curse.
[18:28] So we can't look out over Edinburgh and say, well, there's someone who's clearly a Christian because look, the sun is shining, their garden is growing, they're enjoying barbecues, but over here their neighbors must be pagans because there's hailstones and their gardens like a wilderness.

God is kind to his creation. And we see this patterned in Jesus, in his ministry.
It never ceases to be amazing that when you come to the Last Supper, the disciples to a man can be left confused and wondering, who is it that's going to betray Jesus?
Because Jesus is treating them all the same. Judas had his feet washed, though Jesus knew he was the traitor.
It's a remarkable quality of God and of his Son, this ability to show inclusive love. But also we recognize that the love of God is a merciful love.
[19:44] Because Jesus spells out this is a love that is even shown to the enemies of God. Good gifts are received.

While God is perfectly within his rights to retaliate for dishonor, for rejection, he demonstrates a love that is patient.
And Peter, as he thinks about that, recognizes 2 Peter 3, this is good news. That God is patient, gives us a chance to repent and to turn to God and to be saved.
God's love is inclusive. God's love is merciful. faithful. Then we come to the love question itself. Verse 46, if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? And verse 47, and if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?
[20:49] So again, Jesus returns to this point, everybody loves, even those who are considered the most immoral in their society, even tax collectors, show love and kindness to one another.

But Jesus understands that the instinct of our heart is that our love be at least somewhat self-serving. Let me make sure that I show love to those who are of benefit to me.
Let me make sure that I show love to those who are of my kind, of my tribe. And Jesus says the mark of Christian love is a loving more than others kind of love.
It's above and beyond kind of a love. It's a love for one's enemies. So we are called as children of God to imitate the Father's inclusion, that the model that we are to follow is not that that we see in

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the world and the society around us, but to look to our Father and say, I want to be more like my Father in how I love.
Of course, Jesus does expect us to love nice people, and it's a good thing that we have friends and family and people that we connect with easily, but we understand, I think, our own hearts, and we know even that in itself can be testing at times, but he certainly also does expect us to love the unlovely, those who are not nice to us, those who would make themselves enemies towards us.
[22:26] Jesus says we are to do that because it's the way of our Father in heaven. Our Father in heaven who sustains and provides for all kinds of people, sent Jesus to be the Savior for all kinds of people, demonstrated his love in giving his Son to make peace with enemies, to turn enemies into adopted children.

So we're to imitate that inclusion and to mirror our Father's mercy, not applying that measure of justice. What does this person deserve?
Because that will always tend to limit and to exclude, especially when it comes to people who are different to us. And we're not to do that, Jesus says, because remember the Father poured out mercy, he's always pouring out mercy, and he's pouring out mercy on unlovely, undeserving sinners, people like us.
He didn't say to us, clean up your act first and then you can join my family. He showed grace, he showed mercy. So we're called to the Father's family values.
And again, where do we see them displayed most clearly and perfectly? We see them displayed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We see it in the glory of his love.
[23:49] Think about his love and who he called to follow him. Some of the least likely candidates, many who were rejected and ignored and despised in society, but loved, valued, honored, saved by Jesus.

Jesus, who showed the full extent of his love in giving himself over to his enemies to be put to death, praying forgiveness all the while for his enemies, dying that enemies and those facing the wrath of God may be saved and be drawn to him.
And when we believe and when we experience the power of his love, we can be enabled to share it as we allow the love of our Father, the love of our Savior to overwhelm us.
We can be like Stephen, the book of Acts, the first person to die for following Jesus. We turn to Acts 7 just for a moment, a beautiful testimony to Stephen and his faith.
Acts 7 verse 59, while they were stoning Stephen, I see verse 55, first of all, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
[25:27] And then while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

When he had said this, he fell asleep. Stephen was looking to Jesus and he was loving like Jesus. And when he died, he went to be with Jesus. So that's the model that we are to follow. It's the model of our Father. And finally and briefly, let's think thoroughly about the mercy that we all need.
Again, to take Jesus' teaching seriously, I imagine, is to give us a sense of conviction, perhaps of failings that we are aware of.
You know, if this is God's test, if this is what he calls us to, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. If he asks for us to go above and beyond the most loving and merciful non-Christian that we meet, if the standard that God expects is the standard of verse 48, be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect, you can possibly match up.
[26:56] Now, when Jesus says there, be perfect, he's not saying there will be a point, there should be a point where sinless moral perfection is possible in this life, because remember, Jesus teaches us to pray, forgive us our debts.

Jesus says, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So, what does he mean when he's talking about being perfect as our heavenly Father?
He means put on a love like our Father's. Practice merciful, inclusive, extravagant, patient love. This is the requirement truly no one measures up.
The law of love stands to condemn us, but at the same time points us to Christ. Because when we turn to Jesus, there is hope, there is good news, because Jesus perfectly kept the love command. He loved his neighbor as himself. He didn't hold anything back. He practiced what he preached in his conversations, in his tears over Jerusalem, unwilling to repent in the way he died on the cross.

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[28:15] Jesus mirrored the Father's love. He is the glory of God in human form, so the love that we see in Jesus is the love of God. Utterly unique.

Utterly transforming. We mentioned the Good Samaritan parable, of course. Jesus perfectly shows what it looks like to be the Great Samaritan.
Sacrificing himself, giving everything, paying everything for helpless, hopeless people like us who could never hope to live, to enjoy God's presence without his mercy and grace.
It is Jesus who shows us the beautiful, unique love of God. Romans 5, verse 10. The love of God that reconciles us.
The love of God that saves us from his wrath. While we were enemies through the death of his Son.
When we think about the question of love and our lack of love, often our greatest need is first and always to receive.
[29:32] To receive this merciful love for ourselves. By faith, to trust in Jesus as Lord to find forgiveness, eternal life, and to be brought into relationship with the God of perfect love.

And it's then and only then that the power of the gospel begins to grip our hearts and can control who we love and how we love.
As we understand that we are first and always subjects of a wonderful, gracious love from our God.
As we allow that to shape our heart and our will so that we want to live the Father's way even when it's hard. Even if we might get rejected or be ignored.
That the love that we receive would lead us to share the Father's love so that people around us, including enemies, including those who wrong us, including those who speak badly of us, including those who think the worst of us, would come to experience something of the Father's love from children who would follow in His footsteps.
[30:47] Let's pray together. Lord, our God, we recognize how incredibly demanding the teaching of Jesus is.

We recognize how often we can lack love, we can grow tired of our love.

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