

"Love"

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[0 : 00] Good morning. It's good to see you all. I want to give a special thanks for those who showed up to our workday yesterday. We had a great time of fellowship and lots of wonderful things around the church were done. So, thank you for showing up. When I moved schools in fifth grade, there was a boy named Ken. He was my nemesis. On the playground, he always found the opportunity to give me a little extra kick when we played soccer, an extra elbow when we played football or basketball. In the classroom, there was always an extra snarky comment, scorn and shame. For whatever reason, Ken had decided that he didn't like me. He was my enemy. I wonder this morning, if I asked you, who is your enemy, what would you say? Someone who wants not good but harm for you.

When I ask you that question, what popped up in your mind, there might be lots of different categories that could fill this role. We live in a world where enemies pursue conflict and war and geopolitical struggles. So, there are nations at war with one another and see each other as enemies.

And at times, those people are neighbors who once lived next to each other but now find themselves in conflict. We live in a political world today where candidates on both sides are saying the other is the enemy of that which is good and right. We live in a world where culture wars, where we see others with differing beliefs and convictions and values as the enemies of what is good. But it's not just out there in the media, in the conversations. It's also in our personal lives, isn't it? Whether it be playground bullies, mean girls at school, overbearing bosses, and mean girls, that's not a gender, that's just a movie reference, okay? Overbearing bosses, difficult neighbors, and even in our own homes, where we find ourselves feeling like the people that we live with, our parents, our spouse, our siblings, feel like enemies. Sometimes it's perception, and sometimes it's reality. How do we treat those who are our enemies in thought, if not in deed?

You know, in our world today, we seem to have been losing our ability to deal with things well. We live in a culture of polarization, and I think we tend to look at our enemies in one of two ways.

[3 : 21] One is, some of us who hate conflict just want to minimize it. We paper over real threats and conflicts. We try to see only the good and potential good and excuse all sorts of evil. We relativize or trivialize where there is true ill will towards another and a desire to harm, and we naively hope that things will simply get better.

Or we demonize our enemies, and we see them as evil incarnate and hate them with passion. We create an us-them dynamic, call them the other, and then justify horrific treatment again in our minds, if not in our actions. We embrace hatred and even violence towards them as right and good, and we make them out to be less than human and treat them as such.

Friends, these paths do not lead anywhere good. They perpetuate evil and hatred in our world. Is there another way?

This leads us to our passage today in Matthew. We're in chapter 5, verses 43 through 48. If you want to look in the Pew Bible, that's page 761. And in it, Jesus says there is another way, another path, a way of His kingdom that He is bringing. And remember, we're in the Sermon on the Mount, and if you haven't been here, let me just remind you of what Jesus is doing in this section. It's a section of teaching where Jesus is explaining to His disciples and to the crowds what kind of kingdom He is going to bring as He is bringing the kingdom of God that He's declaring is at hand. And at the center of it, as we've seen in verses 19 and 20, He is calling a people of God to live by a new standard with Him at the center and marked by internal transformation, not merely external conformity. So His kingdom is a distinctly Christ-centered, Christ-like, and Christ-displaying kingdom. And from verse 20 on to our passage now, Jesus has laid out six contrasts.

You have heard it said, but I say to you, six ways in which the people that He was preaching to might normally think was right and good. And Jesus is saying, my kingdom is different than that. [6 : 04] And let me explain to you how it is different. And so we come to the last of those six this morning, verses 43 through 48. Let's go ahead and read that together, and then we'll pray for God's help as we listen to His Word. Matthew 5, 43. 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 Son 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. Please pray with me. Oh, Lord, we ask for Your help this morning. Lord, as we look at this Word, as we listen to it, I pray that You would give us humble hearts and soft hearts to receive this Word. Lord, it is a challenge to the way that we typically live and think in this world, and I pray for Your help this morning. Lord, I pray that You would help me to speak as I should, and I pray for all of us that we would receive Your Word, and that we would obey it, and that we would follow it. And Lord, we pray that You would be our help in that, and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Jesus shows us a way forward in the midst of enemies and hatred, and it is the way simply of love. And so my outline is very simple for those of you who are taking notes. First, Jesus calls us to love our enemies. That's what He calls us to. That's what this passage is about. And the second point will be the foundation of our love for our enemies, how it is that we can actually do this. So let's first explore for a little bit in verses 43 and 44,

Jesus called to love our enemies. We've seen this pattern before. Again, this is the sixth one. You have heard that it was said, but I say to you. Now listen, if you went back and you looked through the whole Old Testament, you won't find the verse, you should hate your enemy. It's not actually there. But by the first century, it was a rabbinical half-step from the truths that are in Scripture, where there was a lot of emphasis on the special treatment of the Jewish people. There was a, in the Old Testament, a national nature that had implications for how the people of God interacted with other people and other nations around them. And there was a pattern that others were to be distinguished from the Jewish people, and that the idolatry of the nations around them was something to be resisted and to be despised by the people of God. And you see these things in the Old Testament. And so from these attitudes, there was in the first century, it seems, a half-step into it's okay for you to hate your enemies. In fact, it might even be seen by some as a call. To love your own is to hate the other. Jesus says, this is not the kingdom that I am here to bring. The distinctive of love in my kingdom is that you will love even your enemies. And look, this love here, it's not a feeling, right? It's not the swoon that comes over you when you see that cute guy or girl across the room and think, ah, I'm in love with it. It's not this unbidden feeling that rises up in the romantic well of our heart. No. What here love means is a disposition. It is a combination, and it does have feeling for it, but it is more than that. It is also a will and a choice and a thought to pursue the good of others to cherish their well-being and to seek to do them good. If you were here last week, Pastor Nick preached on verses 33 through 38 talking about not retaliating. And if you remember, there were some specifics there about blessing and not cursing, about turning the other cheek, about going this extra mile, about giving another cloak. This is a heart disposition towards another to say, though you are my enemy, I will not choose to do you harm, but instead I will choose to do you good.

[11 : 28] D.A. Carson, one of the commentators who writes on this passage, says, defines it this way, this love is a generous, warm, costly self-sacrifice for another's good. And if you see, Jesus goes on, he says, you know what the first application of this is? To pray for them. To see the other person in view of God and to want God's good for them. Let me ask you a question. Have you ever tried to pray for someone who has or is doing harm to you? Have you ever prayed for someone who can only show scorn and hatred? Commentator John Stott says, it's impossible to pray for someone without loving him.

And it is impossible to go on praying for him without discovering that our love for him grows and matures. When we pray for someone, we begin to see them through God's eyes. And that means we see them differently. In verses 46 and 47 of our passage, Jesus says, this is distinctive because even the tax collectors who were the worst of the worst, they were viewed as

the moral reprobates, they were rebels, they were unscrupulous, they had nothing good to recommend them. Even they, right? Even they love those who love them.

Don't we love people who love us? That's a great plan. Jesus says, my call to love is greater than that. Verse 47, he says, even the Gentiles, that is those who don't even know God at all and have no reason to think that they should treat someone else differently because of God, don't they also greet people in the street who greet them? People within their tribe, people within their group? So Jesus says we are to love and to pray for those who are our enemies and who seek to persecute us.

[14:02] What might this look like? I've got a whole range here. We're going to give examples for a little bit. And maybe we can ask the Lord to help us see where maybe this might be applicable to us.

We're going to start with the easy ones, and then we'll move to the harder ones. So, it might be sharing your study guide with a fellow student who doesn't want to do the work, but who desperately wants to do better than you.

It might be showing kindness and serving a family member, even when they have been rude or selfish, even when they have hurt you.

It might be working hard for your lab supervisor when you know that all they're going to do is take credit for it, and when they take advantage of you in the process.

It might mean going out at the first snowfall of this year and shoveling the sidewalk not only in front of your house, but in front of your neighbor's house, the neighbor that complains about your kids who are too loud and who always leaves the trash out and who always plays music late at night and who just seems like they have it out for you to go shovel their sidewalk as well.

[15:31] It's election season. How do we love those who seem to be our opponents in the political sphere? We can reject demeaning, cruel, and offensive language.

We can treat those who are opponents with a different point of view rather than seeing them as someone to scorn or despise. We can work to move dialogue in substantive interaction rather than name-calling.

We need to see others, even those who deeply disagree with us, through the eyes of God. Friends, consider some of us may have enemies where the harm that has been done or is being done is much deeper.

Consider the biblical example of Joseph. You know Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob? He was the favored son, and his brothers envied him for it.

In fact, they'd envied him for it so much that they captured him. They were going to kill him, but then they decided to change their mind and sold him into slavery instead.

[16:51] You can read the rest of Genesis 37 through 50 to find out what happened to Joseph, but it turns out in the end that Joseph, by God's grace, is promoted to a position of power and influence in Egypt, and a famine comes, and Joseph's brothers and family were starving in a famine.

And they go to Egypt because it was the only place to get grain, and they show up, and there the man who has the keys to their survival is the very brother that they had hated.

And he has some fun little tricks along the way, but at the end of the day, he does them good. He blesses them, and he embraces them. Here's another more extreme case.

If you're familiar with the story of Corrie Ten Boom, she was a Holocaust survivor. She was a follower of Jesus. After the war, she taught about God's grace and faithfulness, about forgiveness.

[18:07] And she tells this story. It's a little long, but I think it's worth it. So, it was in a church service in Munich that I saw him, a former SS man, who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück.

He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time, and suddenly it was all there, the room full of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsy's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein, he said, to think that, as you say, he has washed my sin away.

His hand was thrust out to shake mine, and I, who had preached so often to the people of Blomendal, the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin in them. And Jesus Christ had died for this man. Was I going to ask for more?

[19:15] Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity.

And so again, I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I prayed, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. And as I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder, along my arm, and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it was not on our forgiveness anymore than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on his, that is on God's, when he tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself. And I'll tell you, friends, not every transformation happens in a moment like it happens with Corey. Sometimes it's by repeated acts of kindness.

[20 : 24] When we don't want to be kind, that our hearts change. Sometimes it's daily determining to do good to another where transformation happens, and it doesn't happen all at once.

But when we started, we felt only anger, only hatred, only desire for revenge. Slowly, as we do good and think rightly, God changes our hearts, and we are able to, as she did, forgive and love even our enemies.

And friends, if this kind of love is possible in these extreme cases, how much more in our everyday lives? Jesus calls us to love our enemies.

Now, I do want to give a few pastoral reflections because, and I want to do this carefully because I don't want to unburden you. We all sit under a burden of this passage right now, right?

This is hard. But I do want to make sure that I clarify because this has sometimes been used in ways that are unhelpful. First, love here does not simply mean cultural values of tolerance without discernment.

[21 : 53] Loving our enemies doesn't mean that we call sin good. We still need to call sin sin. Love does not mean that we don't appropriately address evil.

If you are in an abusive situation, it is right for you to remove yourself from that rather than staying. Right? It doesn't mean you don't love them if you remove yourself from the abuse.

That's on a personal level. On a civil rights level. It is good and right to work for societal change, for laws to change. It is good to advocate for that which is better.

That's not hating your enemy to advocate for those kinds of change. But recognize that the best of the civil rights movement had to do with loving our enemies in the midst of it.

Maybe this is repeating what I just said. Loving your enemies does not mean avoiding conflict.

[23 : 08] Sometimes it means speaking painful truths. Sometimes it does mean standing up for yourself. Sometimes it does mean pursuing that which is right.

but it is always in a spirit of loving the other in the process. It is always in the spirit of wanting to desire to do good, not to punish, not to condemn, not to do harm.

And finally, I won't say a lot about this, but it doesn't remove governments and institutions from their right place of doing justice in the world, which even may mean prosecuting war.

Pastor Nick talked more about that last week. If you have more questions about that. But I want you to recognize that loving your enemies doesn't simply mean being a doormat and letting anything happen to you no matter what.

But it does mean a fundamental perspective shift where even those who wish to do you harm, you look at them and you see them through the eyes of God.

[24 : 23] And therefore, you are able to love them not because they are lovable, but because of who God is. And this, of course, leads us to our second point.

There is a key in the middle of this, verse 45, that we need to look at for a minute. I'm going to start and read 44 and 45 again just so we remember this.

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 Son rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

The reason that we are able to love our enemy is because God shows this love for His enemies as well. God looks at the world and He shows this common grace of the sun rising every morning.

He sends rain so that the fields will grow and the crops will be produced and people won't starve.

He gives basic necessities in these ways.

[25 : 35] Knowing that the world that He looks at hates Him, does not honor Him, rejects Him, and yet God does this.

He perfectly knows and judges all things. He knows the thoughts of our hearts, let alone the actions. He's not blind. He's not foolish.

But He is a God who blesses the just and the unjust. And Jesus says this is the core of how we can love our enemies.

Now, some of you are like me and you're thinking, alright, Pastor Matt, that just sounds a little too easy. And not just easy because like, it's easy, but the Bible is more complicated, isn't it?

It is. So, Psalm 5, verses 4-6. Josh, if we can get that up on the screen. The psalmist says this about God, for you are not a God who delights in wickedness.

[26 : 37] Evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes. You hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies.

The Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and the deceitful man. So, this is one of the most clear places, but we know this. God sees evil. God judges evil.

He judges people. And He has this recognition. So, how do we, how do we bring this all together? How do we understand this?

Well, it's really helpful. And maybe you remember this because we talked about it before, I think sometime this summer. D.A. Carson has written a book called *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*.

And if you haven't read it, it's a very wonderful book because what it does is it says, God is love, but the way God loves is actually more complex and nuanced than we tend to think of it.

[27 : 37] He distinguishes a number of different kinds of loves. He says, God has a providential love over all that He has made. That's the kind of love that Jesus is particularly referring to here.

The sun rises, the rain falls, He sustains the world so it doesn't fall apart. He goes on, He says, God also has a love that is a salvific stance towards His fallen world.

So the famous verse, John 3, 16, for God so loved the world. And when John says world, he means the world in rebellion against Him. He means the world that's rejecting Him right now.

God so loved the world that He sent His only Son so that whoever believes in Him would not perish but gain eternal life. So His heart is for salvation even as He recognizes that there is judgment and death for those who don't receive Jesus.

Right? There is also in the Bible a particular love that God has for His people. As Carson says it, a particular effective selecting love towards His elect.

[28 : 43] And then He goes on, He says, and it certainly is clear that there are places in Scripture where God loves obedient believers, those who follow His commands, in a particular way that He doesn't love the disobedience in us without upending the other kinds of love that we have.

And look, we know this. If you're a parent, you know this. You love your child but you hate what they do sometimes. Right? We do, and it's the same thing with our friends. We all have this nuance in our love where, hey, I'm for you but man, this drives me crazy or this isn't right.

And God has that kind of love. So when we go back to thinking about how is it that God loves, how then is God's disposition towards His enemies?

And it's true that then God both loves and hates His enemies in some ways because He loves them in this providential love for all people. He loves them in this desire, this heart stance for salvation for them.

But He hates them because of their insistent rebellion and ongoing rejection of Him. Right?

[30 : 00] God's love that brings this providential care doesn't mean that everyone, He saves everyone. God loves the world. So we need to think carefully about what it means when we say God loves the world and when we think about what it means for us to love our enemies.

enemies. But our love for enemies should imitate His, desiring to do them good, seeking to show them the Father in heaven who is providing for them and who has provided most of all Jesus for them.

And of course, this is the kind of sonship then that God calls us to. You see this in verse 46 where He says, do this so that you may be sons.

And sons here is a family term saying you're going to bear the resemblance of those that you come from. Right? So, He's saying that if we have a love for our enemies, we are showing that this is like the God that we serve.

Right? And look, we need to recognize how distinctive this is because there are secular reconciliation people out there.

[31 : 23] And you know what? They're doing good work. I don't want to despise them or say that it's bad. But, they will resort to principles of human dignity and mutual respect.

Things that we would agree on based on this is how we ought to treat one another because God created us all in His image. Right? And so, this is a good principle that's out there that gives a basis for loving even our enemies.

This is at the basis of some of the reconciliation processes that happen in some of the most war-torn parts of the world. It's also what happens in marriage counseling and everywhere in between.

But, at the end of the day, if that's all you have, what you're bringing to the table is a pursuit of reconciliation that says along lines of, don't you want to treat them the way you want them to treat you?

And that's a good principle. But the Christian call is deeper than that. To be like God in the way that He loves the world is greater than this.

[32 : 37] And by the way, this is what verse 48 means. Verse 48 does not mean we're meant to be morally perfect in every way. It does not mean that we're suddenly set to this new standard of complete perfection.

The word there is, if you know it, telos. It's complete to be fulfilled in what we were meant to be. And what Jesus is saying here is, as we love our enemies, we are moving into and closer to what God's original creation intent was, what His redemptive plan is for us, and what we will look like in heaven. And so, this is why we do this. The true power, though, is in the gospel. Bonnie read from Romans earlier, but I'm going to read it again because this is where we as Christians understand how it is that we can love our enemies the way God loves our enemies.

Romans 5, verse 6, says this, For while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God.

[34 : 11] for if we were enemies, if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more now that we are reconciled shall we be saved by His life.

More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation. Friends, this is really simple and really hard.

the gospel tells us that we were and are the enemies of God in our sin and deserve nothing but judgment for that sin.

Until we remember that in our sin we are rebels and haters of God, we will never understand what He has done for us. We will never have the humility that we need in order to love our enemies.

Because friends, it was not because of our goodness that God loved us. The problem that we have is that we think our enemies are really bad and we're not as bad as they are.

[35 : 23] And they deserve something worse than we do. But God says and the gospel says while we were His enemies, Christ died for us.

While you were His enemy, Christ died for you. And He did it because He loves you. He did it to pay the penalty for your sin.

He did it by bearing what we deserve. The judgment and the despising and the rejection and the scorn that we want to inflict on our enemies that God rightly would inflict on us because of our sin, Jesus bore that for us on the cross so that we might be loved undeservingly.

So that we might be accepted and embraced and cherished by God. God. And if God loves us like that, then we can begin to understand what it might look like for us to love our enemies the way God does.

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel that we have been loved like this and not only loved but given a new life in Christ where Christ himself, the lover of our souls indwells us so that we might love with the love that we have been loved.

[37 : 12] A love even for our enemies. We're going to close in a minute with a great hymn and can it be.

I'm going to read the first verse and then we'll go to prayer and then we'll sing this. And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?

Died he for me who caused his pain for me who him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Let's pray. O Lord, we pray this morning for help for Lord, our hearts do not easily move in these ways.

Lord, we want to have revenge. We want to strike back when we are struck. We want to treat our enemies with hatred, with scorn.

[38 : 20] Lord, we confess this to you. And Lord, even if we don't want to do those things, Lord, we desire just distance and ignoring them.

But Lord, you have called us to love even our enemies. Help us, Lord. Help us to know your gospel deeply enough to understand how this could be so.

And by your Spirit, fill us with the knowledge of your love for us so that we might love others, even our enemies, in your name.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.