

Sermon outline and notes:

© Pastor Stephen Felker

[Swift Creek Baptist Church](#), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

7/24/2011

Matthew 5:43-48 “Christian Love”

Intro. We have all heard the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus stated that that is the second most important commandment in the Law of God (Mk. 12:31). That makes it very important. Now my question for you is this, “How well are you obeying that commandment.” I’m sure most of the people who were listening to the Sermon on the Mount believed that they were doing a good job loving their neighbor. But Jesus was about to show them they fall far short in keeping the most important commandment of all in human relations.

You see, in our text of Scripture today, Jesus elevates love to a new level. We’re going to see what *Christian* love really is. We are going to see here that God’s people are to live a life of love that goes beyond the normal, human love that we have for friends and family.

Once again, I have a two-fold purpose for this message. For anyone here today who believes that you can earn eternal life by keeping the law, I’m going to show you that you can’t measure up to God’s standard of righteousness & love. I hope you will see that you can’t earn heaven by the Law of God, but only by the grace of God. Secondly, my purpose is to challenge those of us who are already Christians to rise to a new level of love in both extent, & in how we show our love.

Now let’s see first of all from our text:

I. CHRISTIAN LOVE IS INCLUSIVE

How broad & inclusive is your love? Do you love everyone, or to be honest, you would admit that you only love those who love you, your family & friends? Jesus will establish in our text today that God wants our love to be inclusive, excluding no one. But notice first of all:

A. The Contrast – Jesus says in v.43, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” The first part of that statement is a quotation from Lev. 19:18. The Jews knew that the law required them to love their neighbor, but they typically wanted to define “neighbor” in a very limited fashion. Some would include all of their Jewish brethren, as implied in v.47. Others would only include Jewish brethren who literally lived near them. The Pharisees would limit the definition of “neighbor” to Jews who were living by the law, as they interpreted it. Of course, as Jesus indicates in v.46, they would love those who love them. So their love was limited in scope, excluding all others. The Pharisees were extreme separatists, who would have little to do with anyone outside their likeminded group. In fact, some were even bold enough to add to the law a new requirement that you “hate your enemy.” Of course that would include Gentiles, such as the despised Romans.¹ They would also regard Jewish tax collectors as enemies rather than “neighbors”, for they collected taxes for the foreign government that had conquered them and taken away their freedom. So as you can see, for most Jews their love was limited to family and friends and like-minded Jews. They even felt justified in hating most others, especially in light of the way they had suffered at the hands of their enemies for

¹ In v.47b some of our older Greek texts have “Gentiles” rather than “tax collectors.”

hundreds of years. The duty of love was restricted to a narrow circle, and the rest of the world was left out in the cold. Yet they thought that they were living in obedience to the law, and were pleasing God, & earning eternal life.

I'm afraid that too many church people love to about the same extent.

Jess Lair wrote an interesting book called, *I Ain't Much Baby, But I'm All I Got*. In it he talks of a survey taken by a psychologist among the most pious church people he could find. He wanted people whose doctrine and theology were right, who regularly attended their church, who gave their money, who were the kind of people many would consider the best kind of Christian. The study pointed out some interesting things. He found that the most pious church goer often had very little love in his heart. In fact, that churchman often had extremely negative attitudes toward Jews and blacks, as well as poor people. But the survey did not stop there. Lair points out that the really amazing discovery of the survey was the frequency of negative attitudes expressed by these pious church people toward their brothers and sisters in Christ who were a part of their own fellowship! Something is wrong with that picture!

So whether then or now, Jesus drops a bombshell on the self-righteous people who feel that they are obeying God when it comes to the law of love. Notice with me:

B. The Call for an Inclusive Love - He says in verse 44, "But I say to you, love your enemies...." Here Jesus expands "neighbor" to include anyone you come in contact with, even an enemy, whether Jew or Gentile. You also see in v.44 a pretty good description of what an enemy does. They will probably curse you, hate you, verbally abuse you,² and persecute you.³ The word "persecute" refers to someone who won't leave you alone. They hound you, and constantly attack you in various ways.

How are you to respond to an enemy? Jesus says you are to love them! What? How can that be? In fact, many are puzzled by this wide scope of Christian love that is even extended to enemies. They say, "How can I love someone who has just verbally abused me?" To understand how this is possible, you must understand the meaning of the word translated love, *agape*. This does not refer to a friendship kind of love. It does not refer to a family kind of love. This is not an emotional or romantic love. Jesus does not ask us to be fond of our persecutors, or like our enemies. *Agape* love is a love of the will, that *chooses* to do good to others. It is a love that seeks to meet the needs of another person. So since Christian love is an act of the will, Jesus has the right to command us to love our enemies.

How broad is your love? Let's be honest with God, who knows you heart anyway. Is your love nothing more than typical human love, which is limited to family, friends, and your church family? Notice what Jesus asks in v.46, "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?" Then in v.47 He asks, "And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others?" Then in both verses He indicates that if your love extends only to family & friends, then your love is no better than that of an unbeliever! Such limited love could even indicate that you are not a true believer. If you & I are going to please God and manifest *Christian* love, we must love all people, even our enemies!

Some of you may think that Jesus is going too far in demanding that we love our enemies. Yet there are several reasons why we should even to love our enemies.

² The word translated "spitefully use you" (*epereazo*) means "to insult, to treat abusively, to revile, to threaten."

³ Though some of our older Greek manuscripts only lists the action of persecution here, the other actions are found elsewhere, such as Luke 6:27-28.

1) This was already taught in the Old Testament. What Jesus says here was not totally new. God had commanded the Israelites, “If you happen upon your enemy’s stray ox or donkey, you must bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it” (Ex. 23:4-5). Proverbs 25:21 says, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.” This teaching of Jesus should not have been so shocking, and it was inexcusable to add requirement, “Hate your enemy.”

2) When we love our enemy, we follow God’s example - Jesus says in v.45 that you should love the way He describes here, “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” We expect a child to look like and act like their parents. Otherwise, we may question if they really are their children. Even so, we expect those who claim to be born again children of God to be like God, and bear a moral resemblance to God. What is God like? The Scripture declares, “God is love,” and in the last of v.45 we see that God’s love is inclusive, not exclusive. Jesus says, “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Even His enemies receive the blessings of sunshine and rain, and the good food they produce. Furthermore, God loved *us* when we were His enemies, according to Rom. 5:8. Even when we were living in disobedience to God He still loved us.

There’s a third reason why we should even love our enemies:

3) Loving your enemy will be rewarded - Jesus says in v.46, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?” This implies that showing love in a Godlike fashion will be rewarded. Furthermore, Proverbs 25:22 says that if you do good to your enemy, you will not only shame them,⁴ but also “the LORD will reward you.”

Do you know how the Lord will reward you? He can certainly give you a heavenly reward (5:12), for there will be times when your love be rejected and even despised. God will correct every wrong in eternity. But you also may be rewarded in this life. Sometimes your love will transform an enemy into a friend. You see, there are two ways to get rid of an enemy: conquer him or make a friend of him. No enemy is ever made into a friend by treating him as an enemy. Show love, and you turn an enemy into a friend.

As Stephen the deacon was being stoned to death, he prayed for his enemies, including Saul of Tarsus, and Saul ultimately became a believer. There have been many other examples down through the years of enemies being won over by Christian love.

So we have seen that Christian love is inclusive. We are even to love our enemies. But in what ways are we to love others, including our enemies? Another truth we see from our text is this:

II. CHRISTIAN LOVE IS EXPRESSED IN VARIOUS WAYS

Christian love is not an emotion. Christian love is an action. It is meeting needs. Jesus mentions 4 different ways we are to express our love, even to our enemies. Can you think of an enemy? Is there someone who has done you wrong? Every one of us will have enemies at some time in our lives. Even Jesus had enemies even though He was so loving and so good. Having an enemy can be a big problem. So what should we do? Notice the ways we are to show love to our enemies and others. First of all, Jesus says in v.44 that you are to:

⁴ “heap coals of fire on his head...”

A. Bless Those Who Curse You – Though this and the next point are not in our oldest Greek manuscripts of this particular text, we do find the same teaching elsewhere, such as Luke 6:27-28. Likewise, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:14, “Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.” But what does it mean to bless them? The word translated “bless” (*eulogeo*) literally means to “speak well” of someone. When others curse you, or say all manner of evil against you, you are to do just the opposite, and think of something good you can say to or about them!

So the next time someone curses you, remember this Scripture, and respond by blessing them. Just see what happens! The book of Proverbs says, “A soft answer turns away wrath.” Then Jesus also says in v.44:

B. Do Good to Those Who Hate You - Love must be demonstrated in deeds. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Evil and hatred are powerful forces in this world. But even more powerful than that is the love of God that is demonstrated in good works toward those who hate us.

So look for an opportunity to do good to your enemy. One of the best opportunities is in a time of need. Perhaps their car breaks down and you can offer to repair it. Perhaps they need a babysitter, and you offer to watch their children. These are just some examples of doing good.

Then Jesus also says in v.44:

C. Pray for Those Who Persecute You – The highest good we can do for someone is pray for them. Furthermore, when we pray for our enemies, we find it easier to love them. It takes the “poison” out of our attitudes. You cannot hate a man if you pray for him; you cannot pray for him if you hate him. The Psalmist said in Ps. 66:18, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” Furthermore, to pray for such an enemy will deepen the sincerity of your concern for him. Prayer changes things—but, more important, prayer changes people. Both the pray-er and the one prayed for benefit.

Of course, Jesus is our great example. Jesus was never more kingly than when He was under the fire of persecution. His enemies persecuted Him to death. Yet hanging on the cross in the agony of excruciating pain, He prayed: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). You have never been mistreated like Jesus was, and yet, He loved His enemies, and prayed for them. His followers learned from Him, and practiced the same kinds of love. As deacon Stephen was dying as the first Christian martyr, he asked the Lord not to punish the people who killed him (Acts 7:60). In the 16th chapter of Acts we read of Paul and Silas being falsely arrested, beaten, and put into stocks in a Philippian jail. Instead of cursing their enemies, they praised God. Instead of hating their enemies, they prayed for them and the Philippian jailer was saved. Remember the 4 missionary wives whose husbands were killed by an Indian tribe in South America? They went to those people, loved them, prayed for them, and shared their faith in Christ. Eventually, many in that tribe were one to Christ.

So the next time someone mistreats you, pray for them!

Finally, in v.47 Jesus teaches us to:

D. Greet and Speak to All - In verse 47 Jesus says, “And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?” One expression of love is to give someone a warm greeting. The word translated “greet” (*aspazomai*) literally means, “to

draw to one's self." In Middle Eastern culture they would embrace and kiss on the cheek as part of their greeting. They would also express kind words of greeting. In far eastern culture they greet with the bow, and in Western culture we greet with a handshake, though a hug seems to be an increasingly common of greeting in American culture.

But unlike the Pharisees, Jesus clearly implies in v.47 that we should expand our greetings beyond just family and friends. It is unloving to ignore someone, and act as if they are not even in your presence. One basic psychological need that we have is significance. When we do not greet someone, we are making them feel insignificant.

Here again, Jesus was our example here. Jesus did not limit His greetings and conversations to religious Jews. He ate and drank with tax collectors and so-called "sinners." He would even speak to despised Samaritans. The Samaritan woman was astonished that Jesus, being Jew, would speak to her, and ask her to give him a drink of water (John 4:9). This is especially surprising considering the fact that Jesus knew her immoral background. Jesus was not one to limit His greetings and attention to the powerful and influential people of this world. Instead, He would even speak to the little children that came up to Him. Twice in the Gospel of Mark we are told that Jesus took children into His arms as an expression of love (9:36; 10:16).

What about your own love? Do you greet people warmly and lovingly, including those who are outside the circle of your close friends and family? This can be a challenge for shy people. We are less prone to greet people and speak to people we meet. But those of us who are shy must realize that greeting people warmly is one way that we are to show our love. And those of you that are not shy should be sure to greet those who *are* shy, & try to include them in the conversation. Sometime shy people feel that they are ignored, and made to feel they are not even in the room.

III. CHRISTIAN LOVE MUST ALWAYS BE OUR GOAL

Jesus has certainly raised the standard of righteousness here. God demands a love that is inclusive, excluding no one. Our love should not just be talk, but must be expressed in various ways, even to our enemies. This is not normal, human love. This is God-like love. So Jesus concludes this text by giving a challenge in v.48, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Does this mean that Jesus was a perfectionist in the sense that He taught men that they could reach sinlessness before death? Not at all. What does He mean?

First of all, He is reaffirming the fundamental principle already giving in v.45, that we are to be like God. That is the goal of every true child of God. If God is loving to all, then we should be loving to all. If God does good to all, we should do good to all. If God is holy, we should be holy. If God is perfect, then we should strive toward perfection.

Secondly, we should not be satisfied with half-way obedience to the law of love. After all, we insist on yards of 36 inches, gallons of 4 quarts, pounds of 16 ounces, and dollars of 100 cents, and become volatile if we discover someone has been shortchanging us. God's doesn't want us to shortchange this, the greatest of His commandments. He will not be satisfied with anything less than His own high standard of love.

But how can we attain such a lofty goal? It is indeed possible to love your enemies, but only if you have been born again, and received the nature of God. That is the first step. Have you been born again? When you are born again you also receive the Holy Spirit. Romans 5:5 says, "the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." The fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22). Only with the Holy Spirit will you be able to love like God.

Does your love give evidence that you have been born again? If not, I invite you to repent of your sins & trust in Christ as your Savior today.

Then you need to understand that life is a process of growth, especially in the spiritual realm. This law of perfection provides the opportunity for infinite moral growth. Though we will not attain perfection in this life, it is a goal that we should seek to attain.⁵ The kind of love described here is indeed difficult to practice consistently, but it must always be the target that we aim for. And when we miss the target, isn't it wonderful to know that the love of God provides forgiveness!

Sources: H. Leo Eddleman, *The Teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5-7* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1975); Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011), inc. cross references; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; Frank Pollard (notes from his sermon on this text entitled, "How To Love Your Enemies"); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. I (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

© Dr. Stephen Felker. These notes may be used and even shared for personal study or ministry, but not for commercial purposes. The author credits the sources listed above and footnotes for much of the content. Since Dr. Felker's sermons are generally preached without notes, the "live" recording of this sermon will be more completely in the author's own words. To obtain an audio recording of this message, you may send \$2 for each CD ordered, plus \$2 shipping & handling for each order mailed in. Up to 2 messages come on each CD. Make checks payable to Swift Creek Baptist Church, P.O. Box 235, Colonial Heights, VA 23834. His email address is S+Felker&2@aol.com (remove signs).

⁵ Philippians 3:12 says, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me."